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# THE DESERT PATHWAY.

BY THE

REV. WILLIAM ROBERTSON,

ONE OF THE MINISTERS OF HAMILTON.

"And He led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation."—PSALM cvii. 7.

"Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples; and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come."—1 COR. x. 11.

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\* \* In my impressions of what may be called the scenery of the Desert, I have derived much of their colouring from the well-known book, "Sinai and Palestine,"—by that most accomplished and eloquent of English travellers, Professor A. P. Stanley.





## DEDICATORY.

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THIS book pretends to nought but a few simple thoughts written down in an interval of retirement, during which it has pleased God to withdraw the writer into a path of silence and trial. In such a time I have been led, perhaps naturally, to seek to glean somewhat among the abundant lessons and consolations in the great desert-track of God's chosen people. It is a story whose interest never waxes old. For, at the outset of their pilgrimage, the Israelites found the wilderness a void : by their passage through it, they made it the wondrous pathway of God for ever. And so, spiritually, each one in all the pilgrim multitudes He has been leading since has but trodden in their steps. If, therefore, in the following

pages, while my quest has been one, I trust, not unfruitful to myself, I have, at the same time, gathered up aught that may contain help and profit to those especially who, taking up their cross daily, are, in the desert-way, following their Lord, I shall feel I have not missed my aim. May I also add, that, in thus sending my book forth, it will help me to realise the grateful thought, that, in particular amongst the flock to whom I am united by very dear and very solemn bonds, my ministry is not altogether without a voice?

So I commit the volume to Him Whom I fain would glorify, whether in weakness or in strength. And, in its publication, I dedicate it to one who by her true companionship has lightened for me the withdrawn way wherein I have been constrained to go, and in the example of her own faith and patience has also taught me, better than I knew, the reality of many of those things which I have written.

MANSE OF HAMILTON,  
*January 1863.*

# CONTENTS.

---

	PAGE
CHAPTER I.	
SPEAKING TO THE HEART, . . . . .	1
CHAPTER II.	
THE PILGRIM MEAL, . . . . .	9
CHAPTER III.	
" UNDER THE CLOUD," . . . . .	19
CHAPTER IV.	
" THROUGH THE SEA," . . . . .	31
CHAPTER V.	
THE SONG OF MOSES, . . . . .	45
CHAPTER VI.	
THE BITTER MADE SWEET, . . . . .	57
CHAPTER VII.	
THE PALMS AND SPRINGS OF ELIM, . . . . .	67



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CONTENTS.

vii

CHAPTER XVIII.

PAGE

THE VEILED FACE, . . . . . 203

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SIN OF STRANGE FIRE, . . . . . 217

CHAPTER XX.

THE GRAVES OF LUST, . . . . . 231

CHAPTER XXI.

MIRIAM'S HUMILIATION, . . . . . 247

CHAPTER XXII.

SEEN BUT LOST, . . . . . 259

CHAPTER XXIII.

BETWEEN THE DEAD AND THE LIVING, . . . . . 277

CHAPTER XXIV.

THIRTY-SEVEN YEARS' SILENCE, . . . . . 289

CHAPTER XXV.

THE UNADVISED LIPS, . . . . . 299

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MOUNTAIN BIER, . . . . . 307

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE BRAZEN SERPENT, . . . . . 319

CHAPTER XXVIII.		PAGE
ISRAEL'S KEEPER,	. . . . .	329
CHAPTER XXIX.		
DEATH AT THE THRESHOLD,	. . . . .	339

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## CHAPTER I.

### *Speaking to the Heart.*

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"I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her."—Hos. ii. 14.





It is a well-known thought that, if a man had disclosed to him his future of a few weeks or years forward, he could not, in many cases, look into it and live. The disasters of the path—sickness, bereavement, loss of means, sudden death of himself in the midst of hopes and manhood,—these and such like discoveries, into which his feet advance, would utterly overwhelm him, and bring the prayer to his lips, “O God, spare me that way of the wilderness and the flood!” And yet, strangely, it is not less true that, after a man has passed through some space of such a desert path, encountered manifold trials, like his blessed Master has been “stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted,” he not only comes to endure the hardness patiently and well, but looking back from point to point as he goes on, and specially, from the last height of all, when, in his soul, patience has had its perfect work, he sees the way he could not in prospect have borne, in *retrospect* a very path of light, goodness and mercy marking it with their golden footprints, and such blessing gathered from it as he *never* could have reaped had his path been that of mere earthly sunniness and peace. He

therefore thanks God fervently at last, for the thing that would have scared him, had God beforehand, like the prophet's scroll, unloosed the tale.

Moses was an eminent illustration of what I say. How could he have stood the sight of the one hundredth part of those trials and sorrows which darkened his leadership of Israel through the desert—the forty years long of the fire and burden of a whole nation borne on his heart—the miseries, and failures, and deaths, that strewed the awful line of march? Had that future, even in a few of its scenes, been unveiled to him, his heart would have died within him. But God led him on, so to speak, blindfold, till, from height to height, he began to realise in his courageous soul the high argument whereby the Mighty One was dealing with him; and, on the crowning ridge of Pisgah, in the end, not only do we conceive of Moses as casting his gaze forward into the Canaan he was not to enter, but equally as looking back upon the windings of the far desert road he and the hosts he led had come, beholding the track, that, at his start from Egypt, would have seemed so dark and terrible, literally shining and blessed with the footsteps of God. Travellers tell us there is a faint shadow of this spiritual reality in nature, when, on their climbing upward the steep mountain path, they find the way rough, and frowning, and perilous, but, when again they look back on it from the *plain*, they see it wind in and out among the cliffs like

a thread of silver. So Moses, on Pisgah, got the clue of silver in his hand, and ran the eye back with amazement along its beauteous stream. Could God otherwise have spoken, or done, or blessed, as He had in that Desert Pathway? Were its lessons not more strange and precious even than the rest of the promised land, immediately after the Red Sea, would have been? Did the man of God not give thanks now,—did he not rejoice in all his tribulation,—did he not extol God's way as the "right way,"—and did he not, like Simeon in ages after, breathe out the contentment both of his life and his death, and say, "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have *seen* Thy salvation?"

Now, it is quite plain, my reader, if you once admit the thought of this the manner of God's dealing,—it becomes quite plain why He not only leads but "allures" His people into the wilderness. It is that He may speak comfortably to them, or rather—for that is the literal reading—"speak *on their heart*." It is that, isolating them in silence and solitariness, He may drop His deepest and tenderest voice, slowly and for ever, *on their heart*. For it needs one to be drawn into the cold, hard, and hidden rock, ere he can find the sweetest of the honey; it needs one to be drawn into the wilderness, and to be alone and in its silence, ere he can hear the sweet thrilling whispers of his blessed Lord spoken in the ear of his soul. That was signally the case with Israel, when God allured them, and brought

them out of Egypt. In the grossness and weariness of their bondage, in the din of Egyptian cities, in the blind swarm with which they hurried every day, absorbed, to do their task, then to eat, drink, and again to lay themselves down to sleep, had God come to them with His message *there*, they could have heard, it is true, but never understood,—they might have gazed up with dull eye, but only to drop to their material life again. And had they been transferred at a single step, so to speak, into the good land,—slaves of Egypt to-day, conquerors of Canaan to-morrow,—the sudden leap into such a change of life would have so besotted them with luxury and pride that, had God spoken to them *there* again, His accents would have been drowned. But the intermediate desert-journey met God's great condition. He held them there, surrounded with awfulness, and so utterly dependent on Him, that He could draw near and speak to their heart; He could wean them into spiritual understanding; He could touch chords within them that never else would have vibrated; He could speak to them "Alone with them alone." And was it not so in all the olden time, when God was wont to throw His shadow palpably on human paths,—with Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, David, and all the prophets? His chosen spots were in desert silence. He allured them apart, that there, the veil being rent, He might speak *to them heart to heart*. Was it not so in the touching

appeal of Jesus once, when, with all the coming and going, His disciples were distracted, and He said, "Come ye yourselves apart into this desert place, and rest a while?" as if, in that quiet, they would feel dropped into their souls His deep words, as the silvery pebble is seen dropping to the depth, not of the disturbed, but the clear and silent pool. Has it not been so with the Church of Christ in her noblest seasons, when she has put forth her most heavenly virtues—in persecution or peril? She has been made to "forget her own people and her father's house;" she has been allured, that is, and brought into the wilderness; and so "her Lord has greatly desired her beauty." He has spoken in the thrill of His love to her heart. Is it not so with each Christian life now, whom God tempers in His fiery way? The stir and noises of the world hinder us, so that in the manifold sound of outer things, when all is well, we lose the hearing of the heavenly voice altogether; but God mercifully withdraws us where we *must* hear,—through death, sorrow, suffering. He makes solitude about the soul; lover and friend He puts far from us into darkness; He makes us feel alone; and then, in that awful condition, when there is silence, and the way is dark, and the burden of the solitary life is very heavy, He draws nigh, He stoops down close upon us, as if coals of fire were on His lips. He speaks to the very heart. "Did not our hearts burn within us," cried one of the disciples, after they

had journeyed with the unknown Lord to Emmaus ; “ did not our hearts burn within us, as He talked with us in the way ? ” So the hearts burn whom God leads apart and speaks to in the desert road. They awake to God as never otherwise they could have done. They exclaim, as Jacob did, “ Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not. ” And again, the desert awfulness and beauty breaking on them, as on him, “ How dreadful is this place ! This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven ! ”

I mean, then, in the chapters following, to retrace some of the memorable footprints made in the old Desert Pathway along which God led His people Israel by the hands of Moses and Aaron,—to see how, in each, there stands up some symbol of His dealing with the great multitude He has led spiritually through the wilderness since,—to note how these lessons gleam back on us, full of fresh and solemn application yet,—and to gather this, above all, that, if we are being “ led of the Spirit into the wilderness, ” we have at each step the Saviour voice, “ Fear not, I am with thee : be not dismayed, I am thy God. ” I trust to exhibit to the fainting pilgrim some discoveries of the grace of God reserved for him alone,—to cheer him with new light streaming down to us from an old, old story,—and to shew him, as we travel in the ruins of the past, that “ the wilderness and the solitary place *is* glad—that *the desert does* rejoice, and blossom as the rose. ”

## CHAPTER II.

### The Pilgrim Meal.





THIS famous meal, known by the name of the Passover, was ate, as a solemn pledge, at the very threshold of the Israelites' escape. The whole population was gathered to the banquet; and, as the preparations for flight were complete, and the memorable night wore on, you can conceive what a picture each slave hut, in its silent interior, disclosed—the table spread, the lamb slain and roasted with fire, the blood sprinkled on the door-posts, the inmates standing up in eager circle, equipped for instant journey, and, as the light fell on their swart faces, their awe of an unseen Presence, their listening for a dread signal, and an occasional whisper through the group, marking the deep-hushed scene. No one there, I believe, felt doubtful or afraid; on the contrary, each was eager for the hour of his deliverance to strike, for his hateful chains to fall off, and for the word to be given that he might go free. Accordingly, they stood impatient by the board God had commanded to be spread; and when at last a note of sorrow from the Egyptian dwellings round them woke on the midnight air, and that note increased until it rose, as from the whole land, into an exceeding great and bitter cry,

you can imagine with what haste and exultancy they stooped to the prepared meal, and ate it for their flight. Moses and the other leaders were already in the way, summoning them to flee; so were the bitter Pharaoh and his counsellors, bitter no longer, but utterly subdued at last; so was all Egypt, smitten terribly by the death, in one hour, of its first-born, "from the first-born of Pharaoh that sat on his throne, to the first-born of the captive that was in the dungeon, and all the first-born of cattle." No marvel, therefore, that in the Israelites hope ran high, and that they took God's pledge in the midnight banquet eagerly. Their chains were off; the path out of their dark and long bondage was free; the sorrows of the past were gone; and, from this point, they were to go forth, a nation and a name in the earth. Yet it was a solemn point, that pilgrim meal, had they for a moment realised it all. They knew only the gladness and the safety of the moment; but were they not really standing at the gateway to the dread desert-path?—as they broke and ate of the slain lamb, and as, pilgrim-wise, they then crossed their blood-marked thresholds out, was it not really but an entering on that long and unknown path of God that, ere it was done, would see the youngest of them a gray-haired and worn 'man, and the whole of that generation laid in pilgrims' graves? Yea, was there one in Goshen, that night of escape, who guessed what a few hours of flight would bring forth,—who could

see but a stone's-cast down "the dim and perilous way" he was about, as God's pledged follower, to tread? And which of them then had forethought so far, that, from the passover table, he could even guess the vast measure of the path, as, in God's plan, it stretched through the wilderness before him? Had the boldest Hebrew realised a dream of that, his high-toned confidence would have perished like lighted flax. I therefore say, that, while the Israelites, by the blood upon their doors, and by their feast of the slain lamb, were pledged in pilgrimage to God, they began that pilgrimage not knowing, or rather in most blind mistakenness as to, whither it would lead. Ah, it was to be their first lesson in the Lord's way, that, unbound of Pharaoh, they were to be bound of God, and carried, not whither they would, but whither they would not.

Now, my reader, Christ is our Passover sacrificed for us; and, amidst all the applications that may be made of the type in the Hebrew lamb slain in Egypt, and the antitype Christ slain on the cross, there is this especially for us at present—that no one can enter, as a true pilgrim, into the pathway of God, save through that preparation feast, the crucified Christ. It was the one condition prescribed to the Israelites, the doors sprinkled with blood, the lamb slain and served upon their boards; only through that gate of sacrifice did each man issue forth, an equipped follower and favourite of Heaven. So, only through the blood of Jesus can any

one find safe entrance on the path we speak of. He cannot else claim one help or blessing as he goes on ; in his sorrow, he cannot claim God's consolation ; in his darkness, he cannot look up for light ; in his pain, he cannot draw down the hands of healing. And with no pity so deep can we be moved, surely, as with the pity that awakes in us when, looking on a sufferer who has no hope and no root of faith in Christ, we see him toss in his distresses, and, even while he cries for mercy, the reality of God's grace a fable to him, and the bright pages of the Word of God a blank. Let no one, therefore, flatter himself, that, in the day when he is tried, he can appropriate to himself those comforts of the living God which *he* only grasps who has entered on the shadowed way through Christ. Christ is the first step, as He is the last. "No man," He says himself, "cometh unto the Father *but* by me."

But what I wish to bring out more particularly is—the deep and awful pledge given to God by any one who begins by coming unto Him through Christ. I believe that, by hundreds who have most earnest desires to be saved, and saved by the blood of the crucified Jesus, this is not considered as it ought to be. They, like the mass of escaping Hebrews, are ardent only to be free—to pass the great line by which a weary and detestable past shall be flung off, and a new world of life and safety shall be begun for them ; but, in that ardour for the one chief mercy—to be saved,—they

forget, or do not know, the dread consequences they accept, the pledge they give, the desert pathway that is to follow after. Had the veil been but lifted for a moment to the fugitives from Egypt, how their meal at parting would have been sobered; and, to the soul approaching Christ, and seeking Him in all sincerity, as that without Whom it feels it cannot live and dare not die, did but a glimpse of the way of sacrifice and trial appear beyond, how, like the young man in the Gospel scene, it would shrink back sorrowfully, and, perhaps, altogether turn away! Mean you, then, to make choice of Christ as the portion of your soul? Learn it is no light compact, but a binding of the very heart to Him and to His bitter cross, *for ever*. How can it otherwise be? The very nature of the case implies that, if we pledge ourselves to Christ, we cannot hold by Him and hold by the life we have hitherto lived in the world also. Who could dream of such a monstrous union? or who, dreaming of it, could effect it for a moment? No: the moment we take so great a step as to choose Christ, the poles of our life necessarily shift; we get a new axis to revolve on; and just as, if the poles of this our globe shifted into new sockets, there would be immense and fearful change,—seas would be thrown from their beds to overflow continents and hills, old shores would sink, and new ridges and a new earth, breaking from the depth, would come to light,—so the moment any life clasps

hands in pledge with Christ, the balance of the old is gone, the way that has been is submerged and broken up, the brightness and beauty that were rejoiced in perish, and the new heavens and the new earth of God's way must come. Think of these things solemnly, my reader. Seek not Christ in light, unreflecting mood, as so many, seeking mere ease and safety, do ; seek Him in that lofty, deeply-forecasting spirit that, while it plights itself to Him in an hour of joyful banquet and sweet communion, sees written next step beyond, "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life." Did not the saints find it so in early time ? Happy was their first finding of their Lord ; but, ere long, they discovered also how true, that they must follow Him "into prison and to death,"—that the disciple was not greater than his Lord, nor the servant than his master,—that it was their part, from which none might shrink, to drink of the cup of which He had drank, and to be baptized with the baptism wherewith He had been baptized. And though our modern time is changed, so that the way for us is not now the fiery way of persecution and death, yet does not all true experience of taking up with Christ tell that the strait gate and the narrow way is still the condition of the cross—that the cup is still one of bitterness, and the baptism one of fire, and that the Lord Jesus, thorn-crowned and sorrowful as of old, stands in the bleeding path, repeating, as He did then, "If any man will come

after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." That first step in Christ, therefore, *must* be a step in which the very *life* is given. Be thoroughly convinced of that, my reader, ere you go further in the strange pathway of God ; for it is written at the altar where you first eat of the flesh of the Son of man, and drink of His blood—"Whosoever findeth his life shall lose it, and whosoever *loseth his life for My sake* shall find it"—John adds—"unto life eternal."





### CHAPTER III.

*“ Under the Cloud.”*



IN two or three marches, the flying thousands of Israel had quitted the green land of Goshen. They had taken leave of its sunny sward and the shade of its leafy boughs, and now, in their vast multitude, were hanging on the edge of the wilderness. With its dreary, uncharted world before them where to choose, it was a moment big with helplessness and uncertainty. But the gloom, we may suppose, that did not fail to gather for a time on the prospect was as rapidly dispelled ; for as they moved on, a sailing Cloud, to which the silent air had given birth, was seen to shape itself into a mighty pillar, to take place in the very van of the host, and, as it reached in its column higher than the eye could follow, to reveal itself as the tent, as the rolling garment of the Present God. And not only in the day-time, when the heat was great, and the throng either travelled languidly or rested altogether,—not only then was the cloud as a cool shadow thrown across the camp, but in the night, when the fugitives were afoot to benefit by the cooler air, but, without guide, would have stumbled in the black wastes, then the cloud became luminous with fire, and glowed against

the dark in lambent beauty. In this cloud was the half-hidden, half-revealed Presence that was to be with the desert wanderers to the end. It never deserted the camp in its worst days—it rested over it when it slept—it went before it to mark the way when it awoke—it hung over the next spot where it should pitch and again repose. And not only so, but when, as in the case of the pursuit of Pharaoh, to appearance death was in the front of Israel, death also in the rear, it went behind instead of before, coming as a dread blind between the Egyptians and their prey—to the latter burning through the night with flame, to the former shewing a side of thick smoke and darkness. So that the God-inhabited cloud was at once a guide and a shield; it shewed the hosts of Moses the way wherein they should go—to an eye that could have pierced on through all the weary stages of the desert, it was, so to speak, a continuous avenue or vista, shrouding, safe and sacred, the long line of march the escaping people were to take—and it was also a veil of angry fire to all enemies without, either darkening and confounding their way with vapour of smoke, or shooting forth tongues that made them shrivel and perish. As we shall see presently, in the case of Pharaoh and his furious chase, it was but needed that God should look out on him from the cloudy screen, fasten on him the eyes that are as a flame of fire, and at the one glance, the trouble both of fear and of destruction fell on him and his. No

marvel, then, this Cloud was a banner such as displayed to the camp of Israel noble things. It was as a break in the silent heaven of the providence of God, letting them palpably behold, in specimen or glimpse, the vast overshadowing Presence that, above, around, beneath, bore them in the hollow of its hand. Just as in any exquisite machinery of human workmanship, such as in the stately steam-vessel moving gloriously on upon the waters, you find not the secret of its so calmly traversing the wave, till a door is opened for you, and you get a glance into the multitudinous shafts plying in its depths. So the heaven of divine working was around the desert; but the Israelites understood and knew not till, in the pillared cloud, a lattice, so to speak, was opened, and through that they saw flashes of the mighty God, Who was over all, blessed for ever.

Who now can doubt that of that shadow we have, at this moment, the reality? If there was one lesson more than another, my reader, taught the disciples by their Lord ere He left the earth, it was this lesson of His Saviour-presence that was to be. It was the lesson He gave them deliberately to study in the forty days betwixt His resurrection and ascension. He lingered during that time in earthly scenes, but not as He had been. He went and came mysteriously among His followers. He was now in the midst of them, flesh and blood; He now vanished from before their eyes, as a spirit. He hovered on the boundary between

the two worlds—one moment gleaming on the darkness of the earthly side, next moment fading away into the brightness of the heavenly side; and the latter more and more, that He might draw the eyes of observers, such as the disciples were, on and up,—train them to look, not at the seen, but the unseen,—teach them to conceive a better, nobler Presence than the old presence of the body—farther off, yet nearer—more spiritual, yet more true—extending from them up to the throne of heaven, yet close, in its tenderness, to their very hearts,—till, when the lesson was fairly read, and the great idea had seized a hold upon them that could not die, their Lord passed finally away from material sight—His last words on Bethany, “*Lo, I am with you always*, even unto the end of the world.” And was it not this Saviour-presence that was deepened in them in the fire of Pentecost? Was it not this made their light and safeguard in their thousand perils after? And has the reality not been snatched up by all holy, suffering hearts,—by all weary lives,—by all followers of Christ since, who, in their pathway on the earth, have gone on “enduring as seeing Him who is invisible,”—that there *is* this Saviour-presence, vast as the span of heaven, yet revealed to us near as, yea, nearer than, the pillared cloud of the desert,—on the right hand and on the left,—sleepless in the night, as in the day,—going with us where we go, dwelling with us where we dwell,—and breathing such a voice into the ear as,

“ Fear not : for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name ; thou art Mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee ; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee : when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned ; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.” I ask if any redeemed soul would not give up all, a thousand times, ere it would give up this living, real, face-to-face Presence of its God? How could it, wanting this Presence, live?—how could it die?

I am aware that, when we speak thus, it is ready to be asked by some, How can we *know* at all times we are guided and shielded by the holy Presence? How can we be sure that each day's step we take is a step beneath the cloud—that each day's course, even when we design it as best we can, is not a wandering of our own into the wilds, but a clear stage forward in the way led for us by the footprints of God? The Hebrews *saw* the cloud, as it rose or again settled on their path, and could be therefore under no mistake; but how can we, without some sign, be always confident, and not fear, rather that we often make a guess-work of our life, even when we speak of casting all upon, and being guided in all by, our Saviour-God? I answer, that it is in this great case as in the faint figure of a common earthly case. For example, where there are the bonds of deep affection, as in the love of child and parent, it is well known how an atmosphere of sweet instinct,

so to speak, breathes between the two ; there is such a union and communion of the two lives, that the child will instinctively feel a presence round it even when the parent is not there,—will more than guess, will *know*, the parent's will,—will catch the voice, the light, the influence, the love of the parent on its face and heart, and will be led by these without words, and come through such training, such feeling forth of its child love and obedience, to do, ultimately and surely, just the very thing the parent would desire. The same is true of two friends whose hearts are one: intercourse between them is of such a sort, that the one is instinctively led by the other, feels the shadow of his influence, goes by the principles his life sheds forth, and, out of deep heart-intimacy, does, beyond mistake, the very things his living voice, if by his side always, would inspire. Similarly with those even divided from us by death, but whose spirit we have drunk: you know it in the case of beloved ones, whose wishes we sacredly fulfil long after they are in their graves—whose power over us is deeper, dead, than when they lived: you know it even in the case of writers, the genius of whose books we have breathed until they have become a very part of us, and, as we obey the moulding of their thoughts, we speak of them rightly as

"Those dead, but sceptred kings,  
Who rule us from their urns."

What are these but shadows from the intimacy between



redeemed souls and Christ? I may not hear His voice, nor see the cloud, as the Hebrews saw it, on my path; but I live, as my daily sustenance, in the air of His love,—I am familiar with His Way, and Word, and Life,—I put forth sails to catch the breathing of His Spirit,—by earnest prayer, I bring down His hands to mine, that they may grasp the helm,—I steer by the chart of His blessed Book,—in holier ordinance and sacrament, I climb, ever and again, to the watch-house of the top mast, that I may see, yet more and more, "the King in His beauty, and the land that is very far off;" and, in all that acquainting of my soul with God—that travelling to and fro between the springs and heart of my life and His—that dwelling of my soul under the shadow of the Almighty—I *cannot but* be in the right way,—I cannot but interpret to myself, without words, but instinctively, as the very readiest motions of the heart, what the blessed Lord would have me do,—I cannot but move, in the blackest day and the sorest perplexity, as certainly and safely as if I heard an articulate voice talk to me, and say, "This is the way; walk ye in it." I grant that an unprayerful strangeness between the soul and Christ, an acquaintance with Him rarely and briefly made and coldly entertained—I grant, at once, that *that* never will or can give security that a man's way, in any given circumstances, is God-ordered and right, however he may speak of following God's guidance and being resigned. The words, on

such a one's lips, are simple mockery. But not so with him the very breath of whose existence is, "For me to live is Christ." He dwells beneath the cloud. To him that Saviour-presence is more palpable than earth, sea, or sky. These are the shadows—*that* the substance. In the day-time of his distress, it lies over him a cool covert from the heat; in the night-time, when a thousand terrors beset the soul—oh, in the night-time of grief, by reason of the very background of the darkness, the lustrous Presence in the cloud becomes a fire! The darkness round the sufferer is made as the light. Who would have seen and felt that glow of Christ's love, but for the blackness first, and the bitterness of the night of fear? Would the bereaved have leaned on Him so near, if their other stays had not gone? Would the eyes have seen His beauty so intense, if the other faces of their love had not perished? Ask the sorrowful, all whose help and hope in man have died; ask the poor martyr, going to the stake; ask the saint, living long years, and at last dying on the rack; ask the pilgrims and soldiers of God, who in all ages have upheld sinking causes, have contended one against a thousand, and have held life cheap, that truth might triumph;—and what say they, in their sore and evil hour? Is there mistrust upon their brow? On the contrary, is the eye not bright, the brow calm, and the gaze upward, fastened on the Saviour-cloud? Have these not dwelt secure; and, from the very depths,

have they not cried, not in pitifulness, as we would often think, but in victory, "God is our refuge and strength; He is a *present* help in all trouble?" We cannot explain these things, my reader, save by the deep reality of that Immanuel Who is the Guide at once and the Shield of the pilgrim's pathway—in a pillar of cloud by day, in a pillar of fire by night.



CHAPTER IV.

*“Through the Sea.”*



THE story of the passage through the Red Sea marked itself so deeply in the traditions, in the poetry, in the whole sacred life and memory of Israel, that not only in the background of the Old Testament annals does its impress remain the grandest and most majestic ; but, transfused through those rich religious hues we borrow to this day from the Hebrews' Bible when we want the very expression of the heart, this great event has had its fame spread throughout the world. The passage was designed of God to be as it were the last clear step of His people from bondage into freedom,—from the crushing confines of Egypt into the broad desert,—from the namelessness of Goshen into the rank and triumph of a God-guided nation. It was as if, in the bed of the Red Sea, He drew the deep line—by the force of His own right arm He made the Israelite hosts to cross ; He then closed the gap ; to the last spent force of Egypt, as it hastened up in pursuit, He said, “Hitherto shalt thou come, but no farther !” and there, breaking the bond between it and Israel for ever, He parted the enslaved past from the noble future, and in witness thereof to the Israel-

ites, as they clustered on the thitherside, He shewed the Egyptians, terrible in their wrath and oppression no longer, but mere corpses, dead on the sea-shore.

This great event, which so started them on their wilderness history, was deliberately thrust by God in the Israelites' way; for we read that in their first flight there was the nearer road to Canaan through the region of Philistia, by which they might have traversed the distance in a few days' journey. But God, of set purpose, led them *not* in that direction; because the Philistines were fierce and warlike, and the newly emancipated slaves, unpractised in the use of arms, would have been scattered in their terror before them, and at the very outset lost. Therefore, avoiding the route so direct and short, the great Guide of Israel led the multitude in a wide circle, their faces away from Canaan altogether, down among the sandy flats by the Red Sea shore, and southward along its wave. What meant this bewildering deviation—this gratuitous placing of a deep impassable flood between the fugitives and the good land? Was it not folly and madness in the leadership of Moses? Did not Pharaoh and his people think so, when it was reported their escaped bondsmen were blindly entangled in the wastes about Migdol and Pi-hahiroth—when, summoning their chariots and horses, they made after them in chase—and, when coming in sight of their vast wandering crowd, *they* beheld them in the very mouth of danger, the



Red Sea in their front, cliffs and mountains frowning to meet them in the south, and now the Egyptians hanging in an armed cloud upon their rear? What palpable misguiding of the miserable fugitives was this? and was there not some reason in their complaint, when, looking here at the short road to Canaan denied them, and looking there at the complicated dangers they had literally courted and rushed upon instead, they cried bitterly to Moses, and said, "Were there no graves in Egypt, that you brought us out to die in this wilderness?"

Yet, my reader, in a few hours how deeply would these murmurers own the care and wisdom of their God? What was it but an instance of the contrast we have rife at this day—the short-sightedness of man, the far-sightedness of God? Natural guidance would have led the Israelites by the near way through Philistia, but the shock of arms they must in that case have met in their passage through its defiles was the very last thing they could sustain—had they but seen war, they would have turned and fled; whereas the other path was suited much more to what they *could* bear—the barrier of the sea, the long round, the hills hemming them about, and the hot pursuit of Pharaoh bristling in their rear—even all these were really less formidable to them, because God had been for many days working great wonders in the land in their behalf; some confidence, therefore, was developed in them, that

His arm was not shortened nor His ear heavy ; there was expectation that the marvels He had done in the past, in this great crisis He would excel now ; and, as they hurried on, bewildered and in terror, they still were less dismayed than had their ranks been broken by some bloody onset in the Philistine desert. When the waters parted at their feet, and made a way for them to cross, and when, crossed over, they saw these same waters close, a grave above their enemies, they felt this guidance of their God right, and sang a song of thanksgiving. So with us in the desert way—one path branches off, quick, and apparently the best, but that way lies, we shall say, the heart-wound of family bereavement, and a certain nature is not practised yet in God's grace, or of strong faculty enough to bear that pain, and it is, therefore, turned aside into the long path of personal sickness instead—tedious days elapse—broken health makes whole years what seems to us a track of waste and misery—and death in haunting shapes shuts us in ; but still we are in a condition spiritually to endure all this better than the other ; and when God opens at last the passage of deliverance, and we go through the worst terrors dryshod, looking back we see how wise He, how foolish we ; we praise His mercy that He put not on us what we could not bear, but that He put on us what, through His grace, and to our own signal profit, we *have* borne. So, again, some could not stand the swift desolation that fell on Job—God, therefore,

leads these about, trying them, and seeing what is in their heart, through mingled fortune ; as He did in the trial and tempering of David. So again, we pray for one cup of life—but in that cup there may be the short, sharp shrift of sudden death, which would be a sorry case for some ; wherefore God gives into our hands another cup, deeper and more bitter, as we think, by far, for with it there comes slow decline, a broken energy just when we were keenest to be up with those who are passing us in the race—with it come disappointments and the forcible bending aside of all the aims we held dear in life ;—but what then ? it is all more profoundly answerable for us,—the deep attractive colours of life gradually pale—death, as we near it, opens in a glorious gateway, and we pass to the farther shore, owning the nobleness of God’s manner, and our song full of His name for ever. Hast thou not, O my soul, in secret thought, felt the force of these tender outbreaks of God’s dealing—how He tempers every wind to the life it blows upon—how the near and hasty way that so invites *us* is not always *His* chosen way, often the contrary—how, while we take the short earthly view, He takes for us the far heavenly view—how, while we urge vehemently in one direction, whither lie loss and death, He draws us in another direction, “in a way we know not, in a path we have not known,” but whither, if we have some patience, some trust in God, some uplooking out of the darkness around us into His light, lie victory,

and an heart changed and sanctified, and the gain at last of eternal life. Hast thou not, O my soul, flown more home to God in such meditations as these, and cried, "This God is my God—He will be my guide, even unto death!"

But we return to the passage of the sea. It was evening as the first ranks of the long Israelite train, appearing through the defiles of Migdol, caught sight of its blue waters; then slowly the multitude wound forward, the low ground on the shore was blackened with its numbers, and the eyes of all, we may be sure, sought what was to be next. In the westering sun, it must have been a striking scene—in front, the deep, dark sea; far across it, against the Eastern sky, the pearl lines of the hills of Asia; to the south, the gigantic barrier of cliffs, forbidding all way in that direction; and then, behind, on the heights which the Israelites had just passed, the troops of Pharaoh gathering in an ominous cloud. It looked like the very net of ruin; and as the light of day passed, and the short twilight deepened quickly into darkness, of course every fear was magnified, and the cry of reproach against Moses rose throughout the camp. He was not wanting in that terrible hour. Yet what was his expedient? Nought but that they should "stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord!" Was it not like wild mockery to speak thus in face of the tumultuous thousands? *Yet the heroic confidence of the man may have struck*

a moment's calm ; when, strange to say, the order next—straight, too, from the lips of God himself—was, “Speak to the children of Israel that they *go forward!*” Were the two admonitions not in contradiction?—or, if not so, how was the *go forward* to be obeyed? The feet of the people were already washed by the lapping wave—were they to walk blind and desperate into its depths? No, neither blind nor desperate, certainly, but with perfect trust in God even here. For, as the first steps moved forward on the beach, God opened up their way. By His command, Moses stretched his rod over the deep, and immediately there was heard the rising wind, and the waters, as the Israelite feet came on, were found to part. The awful march began ; the sea stood up like walls ; and, as the Paschal moon rose, throwing splendour on the storm, the columns of Israel in silence traversed the deep cleft cut for them, following Him “Whose way is in the sea, and His path in the great waters, and His footsteps are not known!” By the dawn of next day, all was over. The cloudy pillar had gone behind, baffling the Egyptians in the night ; and when, in foolhardy venture, they had rushed after their escaping prey into the deep, God took them at the dreadful vantage—first, troubling them with His fiery glance, so that their chariot wheels came off, and they drave heavily ; and then, when, dismayed, they would have fled, turning the wind and sea against them, so that, in the strug-

gling day-dawn, the whole host was overswept and drowned. To the Israelites, on the other shore, was it not all as a dream? A few hours ago, they had been deep-entangled and helpless; now, at the touch of God, the whole elements of night and evil were broken up and vanished round them, like the shadows of some dissolving view,—and while their worst foes, the Egyptians, whom they had seen and cowered from at night-fall, they should now, save for a few scattered corpses, see no more for ever, they themselves, out of all that death and ruin were lifted up, their feet set upon a rock, and all their goings established! It was a comment, more than speech could make, on the two watchwords given the host in the crisis of the night—"Stand still, and see;" and again, "Go forward!"

We have asked if these two watchwords were not seemingly in contradiction. Not with the Israelites, assuredly; and in the holy teachings whereby God has perfected His people since, *never*,—but the contrary. As for the Israelites, they had reached a point of last perplexity, when heart or hand of flesh could do no more. But it was God's way; and *then* it was they were adjured to "stand still and see"—to cast their cause forward upon Him, with eyes raised ardently to meet His salvation; while, in response to that trust, came the command next, "Go forward:" hardly one step in obedience to which had been taken,—taken in the *black night*,—taken in the teeth of impossibilities, as

it would seem,—taken in sublime and absolute faith,—when God justified the deed, a path opened, and, as it opened, night and its horrors gave back like rolling shadows, and the God-guided host passed, not to safety only, but to victory. So, not otherwise with those who have followed in the pathway of God. There have been moments when, in the straits of hard and perilous duty, they have been arrested,—every frown has been against them,—every menace has threatened them,—and, in the solitude of an utterly helpless, friendless hour, the spirit, shrinking, has begun to ask if retreat would not be best. But *then* has been the moment, in a strong, pure conscience, to *stand still* and look up, referring all to God. And never has such confidence looked in vain; for, from that dark point of issue where the soul has paused, the word has been, not *retreat*, but *forward*—deeper yet in difficulty, to closer quarters in the battle; and as the dauntless step, to the world's amazement, has pressed on, forthwith the network has unravelled—God has made for it a way, deepening, brightening, scattering step by step fear and darkness in the light of victory. Thus the course of all martyrs and confessors and holy lives, who, in the face of an angry world, have asserted the truth and purity of God, speak to us strikingly. They have all had their crises, when it was a time with them of solitariness and fear; but, standing still, they have appealed to God,—they will not go back, but they will appeal to Him,—and, con-

science, truth, God's word, urging them, they will go forward—forward, though it should be into the very hungering of the jaws of death—when God has at that point unfolded glorious paths for them, and the blackness and hostility of one day changed into triumph for them and for their cause the next. And so now, at this hour, in the thickening of adversity, how many souls are cast down as to the grave! "All these things are against me," they exclaim, in the cry of Jacob. And certainly there are cases, unexaggerated, of sickness, or of earthly loss, or of spiritual despondency, or of forlorn desertedness in life, in which the horizon closes in like night; everything without is bleak and sorrowful, and within there is as the last chill upon the heart. Oh, how good then to hold thyself still in God, —to gather up all the grace within thee,—to bestir thy soul,—to revive, its confidence,—and, according to the watchword of Moses, as he faced the blackening tide, to "stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord!" Verily, thou follower of the Cross, it is no vain or foolish confidence. The other watchword, it is true, may startle thee—*Go forward*—deeper, that is, still in sorrow, apparently down into the very billows of the night; but it is the counterpart of the "Stand still and see;" and if thou hast faith and patience and courage to obey, thou art on the very border of the opening way of God, before thy feet He will divide the waters, *and thou wilt pass through, not to be safe only, but to*



be raised on a rock of brightness and of praise for ever.

Learn, then, the value of the two watchwords of the Red Sea. They deserve to be woven on the Christian's banner, not less than on Israel's, as the twin signals of his course. Far from being in contradiction, they are one. They are word and counter-word—they are obverse and reverse of the one medallion—they are strophe and antistrophe of one song. What! is it answer to our expectation and our prayer, you say, as we stand still and see the salvation of the Lord, that we are bidden go forward, when it is our very standing point, that farther we *cannot* go—we are at the waves' edge, and to press on is death? Yes, it *is* answer; but then, in that moment we are elevated from our mere human energy to lean all on God; and in the greatness of that new state, we can "do all things through Christ which strengtheneth us," as says St Paul—the sea is gone, and our way is plain. O marvel of alternate trust and action, praying and doing, looking up to God and going forward! How many thousands have been the victories written on the Cross that have been thus achieved! Look at that one glorious record in the 107th Psalm. The wanderer in the wilderness is as he would die of thirst; he cries to God; the way opens, and he is in the city of habitation. The fettered captive prays from his dungeon; he is in that hour free. The sufferer from his sickbed sighs his pain; and he is

whole. The sailor, tossing in the storm, stretches out his hands; and he is floating into the haven of rest. What are these but the instant rescue of our God? Oh, never blench from this old simple faith. "Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O God." "The waters saw Thee, O God: the waters saw Thee: they were afraid: the depths also were troubled. The clouds poured out water: the skies sent out a sound: Thine arrows also went abroad. The voice of Thy thunder was in the heavens: the lightnings lightened the world: the earth trembled and shook." "Thou leddest Thy people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron."

CHAPTER V.

The Song of Moses.



COULD there be a greater contrast than between the breaking of that morning to Israel on the Arabian shore, and the deepening of the last night about them, as they still stood on the shore next Egypt? In the one case, it was the picture of a great huddled multitude, not knowing but their next step was to be death; fear and night came together; and, in despite of the glow of God's presence in the cloud, and the fearless confidence with which Moses walked and spoke, the scene was one, wild, confused, and suggestive, everywhere the alarmed gaze looked, of one terror worse than another. In the other case, the morning breaks in its eastern fairness; not an Israelite has been lost in the strange passage of the night—the migrating thousands are arrayed on the white sandy slopes along the Asiatic edge of the Red Sea, and from thence, looking back, they have the deep black gulf of separation rolling its waters calmly at their feet—beyond, the spot of last night's fear, still enough now—behind that again, the long silver-hued ridge of hills screening the dread land whence they had escaped. Who of them could enough realise the change? Look long and earnestly, as they

must have done, they could not but think how beyond those hills lay what they should never see again—the seeming valley of the Nile, in which they and their fathers had been slaves, the cities of its wealth and old civilisation, the temples, and the power, and the wondrous Egyptian life that had hung on them such a shadow. Deep now was the gulf between, and for ever. Here the waters that divided ebbed and flowed as the boundary line of God—ever and anon a pale relief of the smitten hosts of Pharaoh turning up upon the beach to tell how utter was the severance: and henceforth Israel was to turn to scenes how different far—to the wide, free desert, where a builded city there was none, where a human sound scarce ever broke the silence, nature in its wildness roamed at large, and far as eye could reach, there was no check or bound to their going whither they chose. It was just upon the edge, then, of this new life and world, the delivered people, in the glorious break of that morning, stood; and as they ran over all God had done for them, and specially over the mighty redemption of the night, no marvel that their hearts swelled in praise—deep called unto deep—the deep grave of the Egyptians murmuring before them to the deep tumult of rejoicing and of awe within their souls—and Moses, standing forth at their head, gave voice to the universal heart in his memorable song. Nothing simpler, grander than this ever came from human lips.

As, inspired of God, the song arose and fell the song of the camp, drawing even the song leader of the war, celebrated God's might and majesty at the time of the utter ruin of Pharaoh, in triumph over the throne now of Israel, and then turning to the desert way before them, in some rapid lines he pictured how the fame of the Red Sea passage would in triumph be going scattering the desert tribes—how the desert, now upon their side would make all their enemies lie before them—how He would lead them in triumph into the good land—and how, at the end of that long way of victory, they would build Him a temple on the holy mount, and He would dwell in their midst for ever. Such was the song of Moses in the evening of rejoicing—in the prophet-glance he cast into the future, first hinting at the dangers that were yet to come, and then at the final glories of the land of Israel. We may question whether yet the slave heard, when him rose to the high startling Hebrew hymn, set as on a background where they could but dimly see; but certain it is, they were one with him in the burst of timbrels and of dance. The women, as Moses and his chiefs, upon the one hand, sang the words of triumph, the women, on the other, sang the words of triumph. He hath triumphed gloriously, He hath thrown into the sea Pharaoh and his army.

Yet, my reader, is it not  
ing was this outcome.

must have done, they could not but think how beyond those hills lay what they should never see again—the teeming valley of the Nile, in which they and their fathers had been slaves, the cities of its wealth and old civilisation, the temples, and the power, and the wondrous Egyptian life that had flung on them such a shadow. Deep now was the gulf between, and for ever. Here the waters that divided ebbd and flowed as the boundary line of God—ever and anon a pale relic of the smitten hosts of Pharaoh turning up upon the beach to tell how utter was the severance; and henceforth Israel was to turn to scenes how different far—to the wide, free desert, where a builded city there was none, where a human sound scarce ever broke the silence, nature in its wildness roamed at large, and far as eye could reach, there was no check or bound to their going whither they chose. It was just upon the edge, then, of this new life and world, the delivered people, in the glorious break of that morning, stood; and as they ran over all God had done for them, and specially over the mighty redemption of the night, no marvel that their hearts swelled in praise—deep called unto deep—the deep grave the Egyptians murmuring before them to the tumult of rejoicing and of awe within their souls—a Moses, standing forth at their head, gave voice to universal heart in his memorable song. Nothing *so* *pler*, *grander* than this ever came from human



As, inspired of God, the strain rose and fell throughout the camp, drowning even the long dash of the sea, it celebrated God's might and majesty, it told the tale of the utter ruin of Pharaoh, it triumphed in the freedom now of Israel, and then, turning to the desert way before them, in some rapid lines, it pictured how the fame of the Red Sea passage would, in terrifying report, go scattering the desert tribes—how the great God upon their side would make all their enemies flee before them—how He would lead them, conquerors, into the good land—and how, at the end of that long way of victory, they would build Him a temple in the holy mount, and He would dwell in their midst for ever. Such was the song of Moses in its swell of rejoicing—in the prophet-glance he cast into the future, first hinting at the dangers that were yet to come, and then at the final glories of the land of rest. We may question whether yet the slave hearts about him rose to the high startling ideas thus sketched as on a background where they could but dimly see; but certain it is, they were one with him in the burst of timbrels and of dance, wherewith Moses and his chiefs, upon the one hand, Miriam and the women, on the other, sang the words, "Sing ye to the Lord, for He hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea!"

Yet, my reader, is it not strange to reflect how passing was this outbreak of confidence in God? Deep

and earnest it was at the moment, beyond a doubt; and assuredly, also, no greater stroke of power and salvation could God well have wrought in behalf of that multitude than, in the dividing of the sea, He had just done. It was a deed to be forgotten never—to be as a standard back in the memory, to which even the faintest coward might always refer, if peril caught him, saying, “If in such straits God made me free, will He not much more now?” And, as I say, for the time, it did make its due impression: the Saviour-God, in the greatness of His might, was brought home; and, in the hour of that splendid sunrise, when the air and earth and sea were full of Him, Israel owned Him in her heart, and her multitudinous song rose like the chant of one noble voice. But, alas! the morning that had broken without clouds became a changed and lowering day. Hardly was a single stage made in the desert-journey, when the high spirit that had sung upon the sea border broke and fell—the old mean life swept up again over the rising of the new; and we shall read with amazement of the people God had led through the sea forgetting that, forgetting how they had struck their timbrels over it, and the courage and anticipation that had been bred in them in a few hours past and gone. Was it not but like the opening of a veil—the bright glimpse of one moment a mockery, and the curtain then dropped deeper and heavier than ever?

Strange, however, as we deem the swift recoil that

ensued thus,—from the noble elevation of the song of Moses, to the baseness, afterwards, of a most irrational despondency and repining against God,—we ought to be reminded, my reader, that it is only he who is without sin amongst *us* who can cast the first stone. For it is notorious that many, old and experienced in the way of God, who have not the raw ignorance and the untutored spiritual state of the Israelites to plead, yet drop the memory of most signal deliverances of God very quickly from their hearts. In new trial they forget the old salvation; in the shadow of a new perplexity or grief to-day, they allow fade and die the blessing and the good hand of God yesterday. For example, we suppose a parent who has watched with deep fear by his child's sick-bed when life has just been at its last ebb, and the cry to God has been inarticulate in its brokenness; the merciful Physician has heard the cry, and has healed and restored the child from that lowest strait; is it uncommon for the very parent who has risen up, his treasure in his arms, and blessing God, the very next moment almost, when the ordinary wave of family and other care comes in upon him, to allow the old shade creep over his brow, the old fretting begin to spoil his peace, and the old anxieties hurt his prayers and eat with distrust and misery into his very heart? Where is the song with which he meant to praise God for ever and ever? Or, a man escapes a time of calamity by a hair's-breadth of

grace: hundreds suffer around him in the loss of means, or in the sweep of pestilence, or in other like sorrow upon sorrow: he, by God's mercy is preserved, and all he values on earth is safe. Yet, next time there is a panic, is he fresh and strong in the memory of the past? or is his fear not up in arms, unreasoning as ever, and as if God's shield over him and his had never been? Or, at some season we have had a happy spiritual swell break within us,—prayers that have carried us, as on the wings of eagles, home to God,—so that, with all heaviness and fear dispersed in us, we have been so light and updrawn heavenward, that, with songs, our spirit has rejoiced in God our Saviour. But, a day later, there is some rapid sinking down to earth again, the elasticity is run out, the prayers are cold, and the soul that burned, in a new despondency feels like lead. Where then is the memory of our God?—where the impulse from the song of yesterday? Is our faith not speechless, and our hope in the Blessed One lost? In short, we might multiply cases wherein there is this rapid, I ought also to say shameful, change from light to dark, from the song to the repining, from the ardent vow to the memory blotted and gone. All lives daily afford instances. Not a year or stage do we proceed, but, glancing back, we note the record of God's mercy, of His extricating us from some strait, of His making even our trials to give birth to praise. What then, with a conscience, as we must have, of these

things,—what ought they to be but as pricks and goads in the memory, stimulating us to faith still in that Lord who has never failed His people, and has never let the poorest of them perish? Yet, put but a new cross upon our shoulders, and the old deliverances vanish from us like a tablet wiped out and blank, and the untrue heart sighs in the yoke of Christ as if He had forgotten to be gracious.

Truly, what a sad comment are the lives of many pilgrims of God thus on the faith they hold!—their standing at gaze so much, where they ought to soar; their dragging broken-winged in the dust, where they ought to mount to God with wings as do eagles—to run and not be weary, to walk and not be faint. How should such an inconsistency *ever* be? If there is one life in all the universe that should be a life, not of occasional bursts at points where God bestows some noted blessing, (for that, after all, is but a poor merit,) but a life of perpetual kindling into song,—a bow, as it were, always bent,—an arrow always ready for the flight,—surely, surely it is the life redeemed in Christ. What deliverance can exceed—what new trial can ever cast a shadow on, or need one thousandth part of the help again from heaven as was needed in—the deliverance of the Cross? Ah, it is here the secret of the Christian's song lies, if only he can keep its deep consciousness alive! Nothing so removes one beyond and out of the fluctuations of mere feeling and event, as

the soul constantly going forth as a dove, and brooding on the Cross. Let that be the habit of the soul in all changes and chances, and, whatever be the clouds sweeping in the lower atmosphere, the upper sky shall always be the serene noonday of light. It is such a secret the poet makes a graphic mention of when he says—

“Who carry music in their heart  
Through dusky lane and wrangling mart,  
Plying their daily task with busier feet,  
Because their secret souls a holier strain repeat.”

It was such a secret that, like a sweet under-song, ran through the vicissitudes and chequered life of Paul, for he never lost the thought within him, “If God spared not His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?” The deliverance of the Cross given, what more remained that, in the day of emergency, would *not* be given? The greater done, would the less, though a thousand-fold repeated, not follow? So that deep chord vibrates in the pilgrim’s heart yet—so much so, that he weaves into its verse even those things that are abhorrent to flesh and blood: he sings that he “glories in infirmities,”—that he “rejoices in tribulation,”—that “when he is weak, then he is strong.” Who can accompany him in melody so strange as that? Yet, like chinks of light through clouds, such are the outbursts of him, even in *his suffering*, whose life is hid with Christ in God—

till, at last, what has been so murmuring half in secret all along his pathway on earth gushes into light in heaven, the soul no more able to contain it ; for part of the heavenly picture, as if caught from the memory of the old Red Sea passage, is—" I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire ; and they that had gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, and over the number of his name, stand on the sea of glass, having the harps of God. *And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb !*"





CHAPTER VI.

*The Bitter Made Sweet.*



THE Israelites now fairly turned their backs on Egypt, and entered the desert world. One fancies that, under high impulse, their first journey was performed with ease and rapidity ; but, as the grateful sight of the sea was lost, as the way grew harder and stonier, as the sun burned more fiercely from the blue depths above them, and the eyes of the people, accustomed to the green relief and soft umbrage of Goshen, ached with the sight all round them of arid plains, and, in the distance, desolate hills, languor crept over the strongest energy, and, from song and mirth, the march grew silent, gloomy, faint. Water became the universal craving ; and water, at the end of the third day, was found in a cluster of wells enough to slake all thirst ; but miserably, just as the crowd hastened eagerly to drink, the water was discovered to be brackish, so that the thirstiest loathed the draught. It was God interposing, as we are told after, to *prove* the temper of the people—first, by the burning footsore way of three days, and at the close this bitter cup to drink. But nobility of endurance under God's good hand was yet to be awakened in this multitude—in such extremity

of disappointment as theirs, only the sheer animal want found expression as the whole people murmured against Moses, "What shall we drink?" God interposed again in mercy, pointing out a tree to Moses, the wood of which being dropped into the water, the bitter was made sweet, and the parched hosts of Israel, men and cattle, drank. Just when the revulsion of their feelings must have been back into a sort of gratitude and quiet, God's message then came to them, shewing them thus far what His trial of them meant, and if now, taught by that experience, they would do and bear His will steadfastly, never even in the shelterless desert would such diseases come upon them as they had seen the green valley of Egypt, not only not exempt from, but rife withal. What a thrill of blessing surely in the words, as they passed that evening over the weary but now sated hearts, "I am the Lord that healeth thee!" It was the blessing of Almighty God, ere they lay down to repose beside the sweetened waters.

Was it an over-severe test to which God put the many thousands of Israel? We would answer *yes*, had it been that, while He tried them, He looked that they should stand fast in their own grace. But we answer *certainly not*, when we know that He meant no burden on them heavier than He would make them able to bear. The sweetening-tree dropped into the *waters* is a proof of this—that God, with His simple

yet complete Saviour resource, was to stop them ere they reached the point of faintness and death. Only He desired some glimmering of the faith of this to be awakened in the difficult bondage-hardened minds with which He had to deal; and, while, at one point of deliverance, as at the Red Sea, to call into play their utterances of triumph and praise, (which was comparatively easy,) at another point of fatigue and misery, such as here in the desert, to strike, if they would but answer, other keys also of fortitude, of faith, of manly perseverance in the way of God. In a word, He would have blended these responses out of the heart of Israel in one song—the deliverance there, the patience and sorrow here—for it is true that

“God fulfils Himself in many ways!”

and, as the pilgrim of the Cross knows now in examining his path, He will make *all* our nature tuneable as a harp—songs when we are in the day, songs also in the night—notes struck when we rejoice, notes equally of praise when we are in pain—answers to the finger of the living God when our cup of blessing runneth over, and answers of an unquenched faith not less when we are in a dry and thirsty land where no water is. It is thus God explores the riches, the variety, the harmony of the nature He has given us, and, in Christ, has redeemed. He would have it all fully responding,—the joyous ripple on the surface, the grave music of the

heart-wound beneath. So has the poor sufferer, on a lingering sickbed, often been, in spirit, like a bird at heaven's gates,—so has the broken life sighed, even in its death-hour praise, “Unto Him Who hath loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father.”

Moreover, was the sweetening-tree dropped into the wells not a characteristic mode most eminently of God's grace? For it is not when we pray or fret against our lot, that He gives us sweet *instead of* the bitter, but, by the dropping in of talismanic grace behind, He *makes* the bitter sweet. That is, if a man labouring in anxious work, or half-broken by the weight of some personal distress, instead of seeking to throw off these for some state softer, and to flesh and blood far more agreeable,—if he will go on steadily and courageously, drinking God's cup deep enough, he will pass the first bitterness and at last come to the marvellous ingredient God infuses from behind, making sweetness and exhilaration in the very dregs. So Paul exhorts labourers in the field of Christ, travellers in His way, “not to be weary in well-doing,”—not to be overcome of the first draught of Marah,—“for, in due season,” up will gush the sweetness from beneath,—“they will reap, if they faint not.” And he spoke with authority, for he himself had singular experience of God's holy manner in this respect, for he was embittered keenly by what he terms

a thorn in the flesh, against the barb of which he prayed three several times, if it might be snatched away; but, instead of healing up the rankling wound, it is notable that God preferred using the arrow-shaft that pierced His apostle as He used the tree at Marah, as a medium, along which He distilled a sweetening grace, so that there ran into the suffering heart a life and blessedness far better and infinitely richer than had the wound been closed and healed. And need I remind you of the example of examples in the garden agony of our Lord? As He drank the unutterably bitter cup, He prayed thrice that it might pass from Him, nevertheless, since such was not to be, He drank deep to the end, and found then the ineffable sweetness flow in upon His whole soul of God's will done.

Such the gracious mystery by which God couched the sweet beneath the bitter. And for us, my reader, it is surely not the mere general assurance we need thus, that, sharp as the appointments of our blessed Lord often seem with us, if we but hold on, at the end we shall find them richest truth and mercy. No follower of the Cross but, after a few stages in the way of faith, readily discovers that. But, for us surely, there is the deeper certainty, that goes *before* as well as *after* all experience, that we have the chosen Tree of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, dropped behind into the waters of our life and soul. Who believes in *Him*—who has *Him* held fast within, the strength of his heart

and his portion for ever? That man has a perpetual antidote against all bitterness and sorrow. Beneath the turbid and brackish waves of this world flowing in upon him, he has in Christ a well of living water springing up in his own soul unto everlasting life; and the clear, curative up-gushing of the one sheds back and repels every moment the bitterness and foulness of the other. Just as in ordinary circumstances, if we have some possession or resource within us we rejoice in, we can, by retiring upon that, keep gloom at bay, or greatly temper some stroke of evil—as, if we have sacred in our heart the love of home and hearth, and expand in secret over our beloved treasures there, we can brave misfortune,—we can find the wheels of hard labour sweetened,—we can bear loss and much suffering otherwise with a smile; so, but in the highest degree, the soul possessed of Christ back in the very chamber of its life,—the Healing Tree there cast into its fountain,—what power can any inroad of evil have against it?—what rush even of the waves and billows of affliction can either hurt it or destroy it?—fast as the bitter thing comes in, is it not changed, not only into bearableness, but into very sweetness? Is the Lord that healeth it not in the very midst?—does the soul, so possessed, not hold the secret of a smile, yea, a chastened rapture, in the crucible of pain?—and is it not from these pale, parched lips, across which the bitter draught is pouring, we expect, and are sure, to hear the words, as Job



uttered them, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him!" Oh hide this Good Physician in the well-spring of thy heart—let Him enter and assume *whole* possession there at any price,—let Him be held there by the dearest hold. From the sweetened Marah of thy life, thus shall thy song then be—

"Give all Thou canst—*without Thee* I am poor;  
But *with Thee* rich, take what Thou wilt away."



## CHAPTER VII.

### *The Palms and Springs of Elim.*



LIKE the light following the shadow, like the blessing following the trial, Elim follows Marah. It was one of those spots that are well called desert islands ; because in their green freshness, set diamond-like upon the dark and barren bosom of the desert, they are to weary travellers what the anchorage of a sunlit island is to the mariner in trackless seas. You can understand how pleasantly, in particular, the sight was greeted by the Israelite thousands, as they wound over the ungenial waste, and their eyes were lifted to behold the dense palm-grove, standing with its shaggy stems and broad drooping crowns, the cool emerald grass beneath, through which sparkled from many sources the gleam of running water : for was it not like a section cut out of the far Egyptian vales, like a snatch of the memories that in the desert now were brighter and keener than ever—a snatch of the old beauties and fertility transplanted suddenly into their bare wilderness path, and here flashing on their gaze ? We all know the sentiment or feeling more or less, when, reviewing years or scenes past, we remember only as sunbright what may have been chequered enough at the time, but what, as

it recedes from us, takes more and more only the sunny colour, till, if but one hour of that bright past could be recalled into what we count our gray and sombre present, and lived by us again, it would stir our heart with deepest gladness. So with the Israelites ; they had forgotten in much the cruel bondage—they remembered only the green and pleasant Goshen of the past—and here, in the palm-grove of Elim, was shred off, as it were, a fragment from the sunny land, and set in their desert track, that heart and eye might greet it eagerly. And we cannot but be struck with the exceeding tenderness of God's mercy in the case. He had tried the people at Marah—He now relaxed them in pure rest and enjoyment at Elim. He unbent the bow, lest the too long stretch should break it ; He lightened the burden, lest the neck should fail under it ; off the chord of austere dealing, He went on to the key of lightness and rejoicing ; from the effort to sustain these Israelite hearts in new earnest virtues—the ground of which they were merely breaking up as yet—He receded for a time, leaving them a space to breathe, to sink into simple enjoyment and rest. In a word, from the wells of Marah, He led them straight to the springs and palm-grove of Elim ; and as, unchecked, they scattered themselves down beneath the shade, or men and cattle drank deep and long at the upflowing water, evening crept softly on the scene, the *air was full of the glory of the sunset, the desert breath*

no longer scorched like fire, but breathed spicy scents : it was a spectacle of God-given peace !

Perhaps, from this point of view, one would be disposed to say, "Why any Marahs at all? why not one long unbroken string of Elims? Would the pilgrims' way not be purer, quieter, happier? Would the Israelites not have rejoiced in and obeyed God more, had they followed Him from one palm-shaded spot to another?" We answer, No; because, while Marahs are not certainly the choice of God's love with any of His children,—He would far rather stud their pilgrimage for them with the Elims of His kindness and mercy,—yet it is perfectly well known, Marahs, not Elims, are the things most deeply suited to the pilgrim's heart. What was the case with Israel? When a Marah happened in the way, she murmured, it is true, and often exceedingly provoked God, but ere the controversy ended, this was the very occasion of awakening some higher sense of divine nobleness and reality in her heart; while, when a time with nothing but a chain of Elims ran along her path, the conscience that had been edged and fired faded again, her better life became enervated, and she went idolatrously after other gods. In short, the very commonness of God's mercy made His mercy and Himself forgotten. And what is the familiar case with us? Give us a stretch of Marahs, with an Elim here and there interspersed, and though we are embittered, are we not, in the main, moved to

wait on, to seek after, and, at the Elim spots when they come, with redoubled zest and praise, to rejoice in, God ; but give us for years a line of Elims only, and does the spiritual fibre not grow weak, our thoughts of God colourless, and our sense of Him negligent and faint ? The gifts and goodness of God, in short, are so utterly common in such a case, that their value escapes, and although our footsteps teem with mercy, we by and by see it not. I appeal to every-day experience, in which especially there is a quiet life of comfort going on in its quiet stream—where is God, vividly and from point to point, traced—where, in any touch of kindness, from the beginning to the end of the day, is God recognised, —rather is His bounty not so familiar and unbroken that the eye, looking at it always, runs into vacancy, and sees it not ? Hence, an Elim no longer is the intense and beautiful and God-ordained thing it should be, unless it have a Marah for relief. It is as with the gleaming alabaster column ;—place it against a background of its own white lustre, and to the dazzled eye its fair outline and graceful proportions are dissipated, so to speak, and lost ; but place it against a background of shadow, and the beauteous thing stands out distinct as a shaft of light. So, in Elims relieved only against other Elims full of the same unwavering mercy, the lines get intermingled, and the object, by reason of excess of light, fades ; an Elim now and again, on the contrary, relieved against the austereness and the sor-



row of a Marah, shines out vividly upon us as the fingermark of God. One Elim, isolated and relieved ~~thus~~, has more than the power and value of a thousand coming on us in a common run. Such was God's teaching to the pilgrims of the wilderness of old. Such is His holy and most blessed manner with those He leads in the desert pathway now. A Marah depressing, and perhaps overwhelming us now, an Elim startling and rejoicing us again—a deep shadow in our dwelling to-day, a burnished beam of light crossing it to-morrow—a great grief trying us and wearing us down one season, a sudden visiting of God's peace and mercy next season. Would the mercy bless us half so well, if it had not followed loss and sorrow? would the peace fall so deep, deep, if it did not fall into a broken heart? Verily it is God's way, and a way of solemn mystery, if our life is being exercised by it—swift change from this to that—but always so, when we come to understand God, that we are taught to endure our Marahs with patience and confidence, to hold our Elims with thanksgiving and fear—in a word, to sorrow as those who will one day rejoice, and again to rejoice as those who may yet have a day of sorrow. So are we tempered in the wise leading of our God, till we taste our last Marah here, and reach our final and eternal Elim yonder; in the hundred earthly Marahs, "having had fellowship with Christ in His suffering and death," we shall then, as we never else would have done, take

home to us the vivid change—in the Elim of heaven, the substance, of which the brightest Elim on earth is but foretaste and shadow,” “we shall have fellowship with Christ in his resurrection and glory!”

## CHAPTER VIII.

*Food from Heaven.*



By the short record in the Book of Numbers, it appears the Israelites once again touched on the Red Sea, after leaving Elim. They were by this time plunged in the confusion and sterility of the desert hills—their course along one of those broad waterless river beds, or valleys, with which the region is everywhere scored, here, as they painfully wended over the stony soil, the way overshadowed on one side by towering cliffs, white as marble, there by masses black and calcined like ashes. Out of the heat, and silence, and aridness, therefore, glorious must have been the relief, when, in front of the host, the rocks were seen to part, and there burst upon them the sparkling waters of the Red Sea, with their silver foam rushing on the beach. The broad passage-way seems to be traced yet along the terraced slopes, dipping now and again to the very wave, by which the hordes of Israel wound in procession. Every voice must have greeted the sight of that flashing sea. And there, beyond its other shore, in dim haze, were seen the hills again, behind which was hidden the land of their fascination and terror. Strange indeed must have been this haunting of their former

state, as thus skirting slowly, and lingering by the blue pathway of these memorable waters, they at length took a last look, and wheeled away again into the shadow of the wide wilderness.

We can readily conceive how natural the next incident in their wondrous story. They were traversing what is called the Wilderness of Sin,—no doubt one of those vast channels scooped by ancient river torrents, but now dry as the dust of summer. From the edge of such a valley rose in savage bareness and confusion, hill on hill—on one crag, the bright caper-plant, or such-like, creeping; in other patches, dark-green shrubbery, weaving its colour scantily on the rocks; yonder again a clump of dwarf-palms or feathery tamarisks nestling under a ledge; but, stretching round and above all, the herbless earth and the unclad desolate hills—these last, as by shelf and pinnacle they ascended against the blue sky, in some parts shewing masses bright red, in others glowing deeply purple; but all naked, of a single growth the vast multitude beneath them could ever glean as food. What then was the prospect of the people? These straits they were advancing into were deeper yet—the gloom of the mountain shadows deeper also—and the land evidently one of silence, grimness, famine. Moreover the stores brought from Egypt were failing, or failed. Can we marvel that the dread of finding this *desert a hungry grave* crept on the people's hearts;

that, in contrast to the scene around them, the glimpse they had had of the bright sea, and the shore beyond it, woke the memory of the fleshpots of Egypt, and that, stimulated thus, they upbraided Moses and Aaron with a cry for food?

Perhaps the brothers felt in their own hearts a shade of the popular fear; it is just possible; for it was no light matter, surely, for them to lead those swarming columns farther in a way so dark, without help. At any rate, they shrank back, letting their leadership vanish as it were in the leadership of God: and then it was that Hand of Mercy, that had wrought such wonders for the people already, shewed itself from behind the veil once more. It rained food from heaven. Quails and manna were the forms in which the miraculous supply came—the former, blown by a strong wind from the sea each evening in such clouds, that, as they fell out of the darkened air, they are said to have covered the camp: the latter showered each morning soft as the dewfall, and deposited like hoarfrost upon the sands, so that every man going out filled his homer from these mysterious scatterings of the storehouse of God. Truly God's glory, as it is said, was in the gift; for not only was it a striking scene in the morning hour, as the people went out to glean in the valleys—to look up from the meadows, and to see the early sun break on the white or red hill-peaks far above, like the fair light of the living God himself;

but in the scattered manna God made the bleak desert teem with plenty—He was not only present with His people, but He uncovered to their eyes the very springs of their fear and life—He shewed them that these springs flowed direct from His hand, so that, whether reaping grown grain in Goshen, or picking up manna rained in the desert, equally the one divine Hand fed them with food from heaven.

Does the world, my reader, not need—do we, in the cold atheistic moods that creep over us, not need—to be kept constantly in mind of that direct Hand of God? Let us look on the picture of any one day: earth, air, and water bring us endless supplies; common mercies, whereby we eat and live, are so common, that we cannot move a step, if I may say so, without trampling on the manna-shower about us. Yet how banished out of this world of thick-springing mercy is the Giver of it all! Instead of this earth in which we dwell being looked on as a great chamber filled with the ever-living, ever-working God—its grains, its rush of growth and life, down to the minutest seed, shooting at His touch—its rich colours gleams from His beauty—its voices thrillings from His deep Spirit—how cold is the veil an unbelieving or forgetful thought spreads over all, till we see nothing but a face of law, and we snatch the bounties by which we live, as if behind the screen there were nothing but a blind mechanism, and no God. It is surely shame to



our Christian teaching, that, in so elementary a thing, we should have to go back to the manna lesson of the desert. Take up the microscope of one who walks through the world with that lesson well read in the heart: in place of the fixed law, and the close-drawn veil through which the dull eye sees all dim and dead, how luminous the fire, how ever-moving and revealed the Hand, that break round us on the life of every step! Just as, did you walk upon the sea sands with the unaided common eye, there are thousands of objects your feet crush that are nothing to you but as the dull stones and earth; but furnished with the naturalist's microscope, you can take up the shell, and see a rare revelation in it, both of architecture and of life, or the slip of weed, and find it woven in its fibres, such that no loveliness from earthly loom can rival. The sands, in short, under this new insight, are alive with marvels—the common path you walk is carpeted with beauty. Even so, the microscope of that life which leans on God. It looks with other than a common sight. The veil of common dullness shrivels from before it; and, in every daily step, and daily good, it sees the rare glory, and the tender kindness, and the vivid doing of the blessed Hand. It is the sweet reflective spirit of the poet, smitten by the soft touch of God in the humblest way—

“To me the meanest flower that blows doth give  
Thoughts, that do often lie too deep for tears.”

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But the law by which God bestowed this gift of manna was noticeable and peculiar, inasmuch as no one shower ever exceeded one day's supply, except on the sixth day, when a double quantity fell for a portion against the Sabbath day's rest. Accordingly, each Israelite gathered his daily homer—there was always certainty of enough for that, but always as rigid a certainty of no more than enough for that. If any one tried to store up beyond that measure, his heap, from purity and wholesomeness, was turned into base corruption. So some who made the experiment, either out of grovelling cupidity or distrust of God, found. The glittering manna was fresh for to-day, but loathsome for to-morrow ; its rule was,—each day its own homer—no less, but also no more ; and presently, this pilgrim rule came into general understanding through the camp. Each man, as he filled his manna dish each day, was reminded it was a pilgrim meal—realised daily his dependence on the all-bounteous God—and for forty years of wilderness life, all Israel went forward on their journeys, fed with this food from heaven, and breathing, with a significance we have but a faint conception of, that pilgrim prayer we yet know well, “ Give us this day our daily bread ! ”

Now, what but this pilgrim temper God sought with such elaboration, yet simplicity, to nurture in the desert of old,—what but this is one of the main and incessant *aims of His dealing with His people yet ?* The rule of

the manna—is it not the invariable rule of grace? each day enough for its necessities, but nought for superfluities—this present hour, its measure clear and full, and to-morrow, hour by hour, its measure sure to come also, but never to-morrow anticipated to-day? If we have the pilgrim's staff in hand, and are going on in the pilgrim mind, we shall speedily and rejoicingly discover this—that God's grace is sufficient for us, that it flows in an even and steady stream, never dropping low to a dry channel, never swelling till its banks are burst, but each moment revolving to us, sure as God himself, with that moment's cup. What would we have more? Some unhappy hearts there are who cannot cease hurrying forward in an anxious anticipation into the future. Is it sickness that is slowly coming on them?—how are they to bear it? is their question. Are they threatened, or have they wrought themselves into the belief that they are threatened, with some loss or sorrow?—how are they to withstand in the evil day? Are they visited by the thought of death?—how are they to die? in the dreadful hour, how will the heart be held up? how will the silver cord be loosened in the deep soul and let go? Such terrors as these afflict many travelling in the way of God beyond all calculation; they would fain have assurance or supply of grace now, for the hour of coming crisis then, like the Israelites who would not trust God in spite of His own words, but went out to fill their homers twice over, so

that they might not only be fed to-day, but be secure against the morrow also. And what but this same un-pilgrim temper accounts for the creeping habits whereby many now are by slow degrees destroyed of this bitter world? For you note many such begin to accumulate money, and the other goods of this life, on the plea of a wise provision against the future, and that it is right, further, to reap the fruits of one's honest industry—pleas there is no disputing whatever, so long as that line, within which alone they are justified, is not passed: but the misfortune is, that the habit, growing on a man, far outruns by and by the pled necessities; gold, comforts, luxury, prosperity, are gathered, heaped up, literally, in some instances, piled, for their own sakes; and instead of the simple daily gift out of God's hand, the soul turns in upon its own full-fed state, and says, "Soul, take thine ease; thou hast much goods laid up in store!" What is the result? Simply, that the manna accumulation is followed by the manna curse; either the heart, overlaid by the accretions of its wealth, like wood changed by certain mineral droppings slowly into stone, becomes gradually of one substance with that wealth—gold to gold, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust,—or in the midst of its stored means, there eats into it the canker of unsatisfied longing, or the fire-spot of poisonous care.

So God repeats the old manna tale; and when will

we as pilgrims in His pathway, my reader, learn the simple pilgrim trust? What assurance dearer, better, for me than that no one moment will lack a God-given supply? I have the morsel that is enough bestowed to-day; but why should I embitter its eating by a straining forward distrustfully into the morrow? Suppose that the worst of my fears should in reality fall out, will the proper grace not flow forth to meet it?—if I am on a sick-bed, will a sick-bed's grace not fall upon my heart sufficient?—if I am to be struck with calamity, will a measure sufficient not first break the stroke, and then afterwards pour into and salve the wound?—if I am to die, will dying grace sufficient not reach me? as the cold shade advances on me one way, the light of Christ's nearness advancing on me the other way, till the light dispels the darkness, and the death-pillow I feared is to me the Saviour's breast! How intense the simplicity of this pilgrim lesson—each day, each hour, its own childlike trust in God; and how good if, in the Christian crowd, it were, even in a measure, generally taken to heart! How, over all the tumult and distractions, the anxieties and the strife, with which the movement of our life goes on, this lesson would be as oil poured upon troubled waters, as the voice of Christ speaking in the streets again—"Take *no* thought for the morrow; for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself!"

Walk, then, in the golden medium of the manna rule. Distrust on this side is rebuked ; for, far as your wants may extend, like the running of a wave into some deep-bosomed bay they break at last all round on the shore of God's love, and at every point in the meeting line, there is repeated, "My grace is *sufficient* for thee!" And presumption on that side is rebuked ; for, rushing into wilful situations of difficulty or temptation, or whatever it be, where an *overplus* of grace is needed, you will then find that the promise of *sufficiency*—for it is only sufficiency God pledges—fails you, and is gone ; just as, in what are called Artesian wells, the principle is, that the stream rises to the level of its source, and up to that mark, if you ascend, the crystal volume bubbles plentifully out, but, if you go above that line, the sand is dry, and the stream is lost. So God marks your life-level. Keep within its limits, and all your well-springs are aboundingly in Him ; transgress beyond His way, and the supply vanishes, as water does in sand. Thus, learning God, our way fares on in Him evenly and happily—each hour's lack having its *enough* provision as the hour comes round ; and as we accept this simple leaning on the heavenly grace, we who in the Lord Jesus Christ have now the imperishable bread of life, like the Israelites with their commemorative pot of manna placed in their tabernacle before God, we shall be taught daily in our prayers and *our praise* to set forth before Him, as it were, the

replenished vessels of our souls, saying, "Our fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead ; *this* is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof and not die !"

"Lord, evermore give us this Bread !"





CHAPTER IX.

*The Smitten Rock.*



NOTWITHSTANDING that the face of the wilderness was each morning whitened by the fall of the frost-like manna, to the Israelites it had no look yet of kindness or home. Every step led them into regions more desolate and gloomy ; and the fear of thirst especially grew into a fixed suffering, which went on till, in the burning aridity of all things around them, they could bear it no longer. Was it the case that God's gifts and deliverances, wonderful as they had been, were destined always to keep them on the stretch of fear,—that, if He brought them through the Red Sea, it was to plunge them in the depths of the desert,—that, if He rained manna on them for food, it was to make the want of water kindle in them a raging thirst? Were they to obtain their life and sustenance thus only in tantalising fragments?—soon as God had done a deed of relief for them, was He to retire into silence and remoteness, till they importuned Him wildly for something else? In a word, was He dwelling with them, or was He not? Such, you may conjecture, were the surmises floating through the camp ; and all the more encouraged that the route the people traversed lay continually along

those river-beds we have spoken of, the very sight of which suggested the old rush of water,—here, by the deep-worn ruts—there, by a side cleft in the rocks, where a hill stream had poured into the main current—and then again, by the fringes of shrubbery which grew along the bank, their branches in such wise that they might have been dipping into the stream. But the stream was vanished, the river-bed was dry, and instead of giving water to the lips, its very parchedness everywhere, through the torture of contrast, drank the pilgrim's spirit up.

Hence the murmur of the weary Israelites against Moses caught this time the added ferocity of thirst ; and, forgetful of the mercies of their God, the fire of their misery and fear broke out in threats as well as in reproach. It was a daring temptation of the Most High God : yet Moses turned to Him with the complaint, as something not altogether unworthy of pity ; and accordingly the Lord, in silent patience, withdrew Moses and the elders of the people with him into a deeper winding of the valley, he with the rod that had smitten the Nile to smite a selected well, they to be the witnesses of God's miracle in the stroke ; and then, in the veiled recess, as the cloud of Divine presence settled on it, the touch was given to the stony mass—one moment its granite face was cold and hard—next, it had broken in twain, and given from its breast a *leaping* waterflood. The dell woke to the unwonted

music as the stream dashed abroad, as it found a course in the old dried water-mark, as it broke upon the eager sands, as the drooping bushes quivered in its sparkle into new life—and as finally, bursting into the open plain, it came, broad and cool and delicious, on the gaze of all the camp; and the men and women and little ones, with their jaded cattle, hurried to its banks, stood in its rushing wave, and, in that full tide of God's mercy, quenched their thirst deep and long. Still the smitten rock under Horeb poured its volume, and still the pilgrim hordes drank. Surely, as the fiery faintness and thirst went off their souls, and went off the waste, there was, deep in each heart, the rock of hard ingratitude broken, and the gush of penitence and praise flowing forth.

So, is it not always seen that the sealed fountain breaks not forth till the rock be broken? The face of the rock in Horeb was unwetted by a single drop of moisture—it was silent and arid in its strong seat—till the rod of Moses broke it, and the waters rushed *then* unrestrainedly into day. The heart never yields its deepest outflow to God till, similarly, it is smitten, and its hardness rent. We have hundreds of examples not far to seek. What is first conversion unto God, but such an unsealing of the stony heart?—cold, silent, barren the one while, in its natural state; but again smitten by the Spirit of power, and, at His touch, penitence and faith and love and rejoicing and

prayer, gushing from the broken heart into light. Paul was touched in such a way when he fell on the Damascus road, and his fierce spirit, melted within him, poured itself out ever after in a shining stream of ministry for Christ. What again is God's touch of affliction, or of sharp privation, or of keen personal chastisement, or of such trial as goes quivering like a lancet of fire into the last nerve and tenderness of the soul—but as the touch of the rod of Moses, light upon the calm and stony surface of our ordinary life, but having power to dissolve it to its last hidden depth, and to extract its burst of supplication and its surrender of itself in helplessness to God? My reader, we may thank God ardently when He deals with us so. If our lives went on as those of many do, in perfect worldly calm—never pierced or sounded beyond the inch-depth of sentiment and quiet feeling and quiet intercourse that serve us well enough in ordinary days, and that keep society in its comfortable round—there would remain, alas, in the deep centre of each life the unbroken rock, the dead and voiceless soul. We should never ourselves know the soul's power of response to God. An occasional movement to pity or to tears in the world would not tell us—neither would the flicker of a stray emotion, such as we are all thrilled by now and then, waken in us its awful speech. No, it needs the deep of God's meaning to call to the deep of our dormant souls—the rod to smite us—the iron to enter,

—and then, although it be terrible in the day of our affliction, the breaking up of our peace, and the movement of our grief and trouble be, as David cries, like the very “pains of hell;” yet it is the fountain from its hidden place called forth at last—the silent voice finding vent—the life revealed, conjured out, and in all its height and depth of prayer uttering itself to God. Is it not infinitely better so, than that it should go silent as the stone, unconverted, unbroken, to the grave? Such a soul *may* have a capacity of life for God, but that has never flashed into action; it *may* have a power of prayer in it, but that has never come to light; it *may* have possibilities of earnestness and faith in it, second to none, but these are restrained and dumb: and what profit hath the natural heart thus, if, stone-still, it goes to the dead as it has lived? Its money perishes with it—its heart-springs, unopened in life, have the rock sealed on them for ever. Whereas God’s secret is with the broken heart: He tries it and proves it, *that He may see what is in it*—that it may open at His touch—that it may yield its deep outgushing at His feet. Who would not choose that yielding of the soul to God, even at a greater cost? Terrible may be the rending of the rock, but in the yielding of its life then, as face answereth to face in water, so, in its lucent wave, God *sees what is in it*—He meets there the image of His own grace and love!

But under the shadow of the rock in Horeb, we

must learn greater things still. St Paul gives us his holy authority for it, that "that Rock was Christ." And accepting this high reality accordingly—through the dim sign of the desert looking, till there grows out upon us the luminous and awful Christ—who ever won, we ask, to the profoundest understanding and life of Him, save through the Rock smitten and cleft in twain? For example, about our adorable Lord in His ministry and work, there were and are many things *easy* to be understood; the wisdom with which He spake as never man spake—the dignity, the holiness that clothed Him—the glory which He had in heaven, and whose clouds in half-veiled radiance followed Him on earth, and the glory which He *now* has in heaven again,—these, and such like things, exalting, and, as with colours of light, setting themselves into the portrait of One who is our Saviour and God, we find *easy* to be understood—they commend themselves to the apprehension of our intellect—they accord with our preconceptions of what Christ ought to be—they are a track so obvious, that, so long as He is in this aspect before us, we readily can follow. But when the leaf is turned, and we meet the transcript of darkness and humiliation and sorrow and death on the other side—when we must follow Jesus in His human privations and pain—stand near Him in His tears—catch some outbreak from His agony of soul—and trace Him *finally* through smiting, scourging, insult, the very dust,



till, beneath the tree, the billows of His sorrow roll on us, and we hear the nails driven, and we see Him die,—ah, then the hardness of the mighty problem staggers us. The other aspect was that of the strong calm rock; this aspect of humiliation and death is the rock broken from the top throughout. How can we understand here? Intellect shrinks and rebels against the problem, as the many theories and questions of our own day, whereby the death of the crucified Christ is either pitiaibly made what it was not, or is as pitiaibly dwindled into nothing, prove. Pride of mind and learning, prejudice of foregone conclusions, our own life and tone in the world, on the mass of which, if we let down the Cross, it would burn like fire, —all these hold us at the threshold of the Smitten Rock—they blind the eyes that they cannot see—they preoccupy and materialise the heart that it cannot understand; so that, to many, many practically, the crucified Christ is less a reality than some exploded fable. Yet where the heart *can* be stripped down into very lowliness of faith—where the furnace of amazed doubts and scepticisms *can* be passed through, without the soul perishing in the passage—where the life humbled and changed *can* be brought as a little child to God; there, at that cost, the Smitten Rock in its awfulness *is* revealed—the gateway of it is entered, and there are found the deep, otherwise unsearchable, riches of Christ flowing up evermore. The last

reserved spring of God's love is here unsealed. The exaltation and the throne are calm in their face as the solid rock ; but the humiliation and the cross, in their pierced bosom, gush with hid treasure, and the believing soul, drinking eagerly, exclaims, " This is spirit, this is life ! "

Only then through the body broken and the blood shed is the hidden life of Him Who is our Saviour and our God reached. Thomas was a memorable instance of what all, arriving at the pierced heart of Christ through a painful quest, have been. He could see the outer shape and features well enough ; but it was the wounds of the Smitten Rock he sought—the marks of the nails in the hands and the feet, and the mark of the spear in the side—and not till he had thrust his finger into these—not till he had, so to speak, entered by the door of agony and shame and death over again—the rent veil of the Redeemer's flesh—did he sink down, thrilled through by the power of Jesus, and exclaiming, " My Lord, and my God ! " A search up to that point sorrowful and bitter—but *from* that point a burning apostleship—a soul knit to Christ—a life charged with the quick current of His grace. So with the seekers after Christ still. If we would find Him in His inner chambers where He dwells, strait is the gate, narrow is the way—we must find Him through the rocks rent and the graves opened—the old *must* crumble round us, the whole world of cherished

things must perish—and then, through this heart-revolution, Christ is won, the wounds we dared to search stream with life, the riven rock we dared to enter gushes with the streams of God. Oh, the glad discovery of Christ thus in the dry and thirsty world ! Strait is the gate and narrow is the way, it is true—but *after* the discovery, one of the great apparent contradictions of grace begins to take effect. “Take My yoke upon you,” says Christ, “for My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” Just as with Thomas ! Dark the preface, bright the volume—hard the entrance, blessed the interior rest—terrible the smiting of the stone, glorious its upleaping wave. Did not the Israelites drink and lave themselves, and drink and lave themselves again ? So you have heard of the patient tossing in fever, and in his dreams of fire longing that he could lay himself down in the bed of some flowing stream, that the cold wave might flow for ever above his head. Who knows not, that, in the hot fever of sin and of the world, this is realised, when the Rock, which is Christ, is reached, when the soul, having no rest hitherto, flees into His wounds, and the river of the water of life pours deliciously on its fire and thirst ? Or you have heard of the deceived wayfarer in the desert hastening after the mirage, with visions of a cool rippling water in his eye, that, as he nears the spot, fade into the treacherous sand and are gone. Who knows not, again, that these visions are indeed realised

when, out of the falsity and vanity of life, the soul that betakes itself to Christ finds the true desert stream—in Him a repayment for the long way and the hard fare—a moment of deception, never—so that, as the wearied feet bathe—as the hands catch drops from the flowing rock—as the head has its cold baptism poured upon it—as the lips drink, and drink again—the refreshed, the rejoicing, the utterly satisfied life breaks out in this way of yet deeper craving—

“Rock of Ages, cleft for me!  
Let me *hide* myself in Thee!”

## CHAPTER X.

On the Hill, and in the Plain.



It was just beyond the shower of manna, and the stream from the rock, that God deemed the Israelites capable of the first forth-putting of a new virtue. He had struck on several keys in the Hebrew heart since the flight from Egypt; but this new key of courage in battle He had, as we have seen, refrained from striking—He had turned the multitude aside rather from the short way to Canaan, knowing that the last thing the timorous slave-mind could bear, was to see war. Now, however, they were well on in the solemn pathway: the hardships they had passed had given them sinew: the greater events and the dangers yet to come demanded sinew stronger still: wherefore, at this point, when they were hurrying through the broad vale of Rephidim, God saw fit to touch the key that had hitherto slept, and the note of battle sounded.

The first foes were the Amalekites, a fierce Bedouin tribe, whose strongholds were the cliffs and hills lying to the north of the pass through which the Israelites were making way. Scattered about the heads of that pass were thick groves, it is supposed, of palms and tamarisks, beneath the soft gloom of which many springs

oozed through moss and rushes, making the region, in the heart of surroundings so scathed and sterile, a scene unusually green. No wonder, therefore, if the desert tribes claimed it as their choice resort, and if the sight of the swarming intruders kindled them with alarm and fury. Accordingly, these men of Amalek, dropping from their heights, assailed the rear-ranks of Israel, where the weary and the footsore received the shock first. But the energy of Moses speedily redeemed the time. To meet the assault, he pushed back a picked band under the brave leadership of Joshua; and while they, in compact and stern order, moved on the plain, he himself, with Aaron and Hur, climbed the watch-tower of one of those rocky battlements girdling the valley and rising in their dark-red mass sheer from the plain level. There he posted himself, the rod of God, as a banner to the people, in his hand. We read in the experiments of science of the rod used, whereby, as it points upward, the stream of electric fire is drawn from the cloud. So this rod of Moses, so celebrated to the people now—the rod that had charmed the Nile—the rod that had divided the sea—the rod that had smitten the rock—was uplifted again in the hand of God's servant, and, while he, as mediator for Israel, prayed and held it pointed as his sign God-ward, it became a conductor drawing fire from heaven—by its stem the flame of power streamed *to the warriors beneath*—so that, as the rod was held



strong and straight, Israel prevailed—as the hands of Moses grew heavy and the rod drooped, Israel gave back, and Amalek prevailed. What a deep interest on that grand picture! All the hill-sides and vantage-points in the background covered with the onlooking thousands; in the plain the gleaming battle, half hidden by its dust, turning now this way, now that; and on the foreground crag above, the figure of Moses like a mighty seer, his rod held to heaven. True, his strength gave way, and the staff wavered; but his kinsmen first propped him with a seat of stone, and then on both sides upheld his hands, and there, tremulous, but steady, in the red flush of sunset, were seen the raised brow and the pleading figure and the shining banner of God, so that we can imagine how the irrepressible shout of all Israel rang out at last, and the Amalekites were scattered. Moses on the hill and Joshua in the plain—each looking to the other—as the latter fought, the former invoking God, and the latter, through the former, receiving down Divine power to rest upon him—thus had these two gotten them the victory.

You would say that each of these leaders had his noble function, the one distinct from the other, yet both combined to work out the purposes of the Most High. Moses was not for battle; Joshua was not for prayer and for holding the upraised staff of God; each could not take the other's place; but each in his own

place wrought with the other for this common achievement of the Amalekites' defeat. Just as, in like manner, the statesman's place is in the cabinet, the general's in the field—they cannot exchange or usurp one another's functions ; but, putting forth each his own talent, they co-operate in some one great national deed. Or as the thinker's post is his closet, that of the practical man of science is in the workshop ; they would make dire helplessness and confusion if they changed places ; but the thought and the action going together in their respective departments, they bring glorious inventions into light. So in the kingdom of God, there is the Spirit still saying as of old, "*Separate me Paul and Barnabas!*" Each man has his distinct work apportioned : here a stout-hearted missionary to brave a life of vicissitude and peril—there a quiet saint to be the light of his own and half-a-dozen neighbouring families at home ; here one to dip deep into the secluded study of God's Word—there another, through his wealth, or energy, or public turn, to carry out that Word in practical power ; here a preacher with the golden tongue of eloquence to stir crowds—there the poor heart in its voiceless retirement, or the sufferer on his sick-bed, to breathe apart the longing and the ardency of prayer. Such is God's happy arrangement, by which the meanest as well as the loftiest talent finds its spot and work ; each cannot pass from its own position to the *other's* ; each need never envy or despise the other ;

for, assigned their several parts by God himself, some on the hill-top, some in the plain, they are all honourable alike before Him—they are all stones alike in the great breakwater, whereby God arrests the kingdom of the wicked one, and makes way on the earth for that kingdom of victory, “which is righteousness, peace, joy in the Holy Ghost.”

But the question may arise, Who of the two, Moses on the hill, or Joshua in the plain, represented, if I may say so, the mightier power of God? We usually assign the greater honour to the man of fearless action; not to the Moses looking on from a distance, even though he may have sketched the plan of battle, but to the heroic Joshua grappling in the conflict hand to hand. Yet of these two forces there is not a doubt God raised the former at Rephidim into higher conspicuousness than the other. For Moses had the weight of the whole day's crisis in his heart. On his rocky platform he stood high and in direct communication with God. There was the glow of an impassioned attitude and grandeur round him. He clasped the banner of the Lord; his arms, as they rose or fell—his prayer, as it swelled or died—moved either victory or defeat; and finally, as he was helped to lay a steady grasp on heaven, the Israelites drove their enemies in flight. I say, therefore, that of the two forces, Moses and Joshua, prayer and action, while each was essential to the other, and each had its own noble honour, the former at Rephidim

was made pre-eminent. And so in the labours and conflicts of the Church of Christ : it has not been so much those who have been in the heat and burden of the day, illustrious as are their names and deeds, and their work such, that without it God's kingdom must have been stayed ; still it has not been so much these on whom God has hung the weight of His mighty issues, as on the far less known watchers on the towers of Zion—the saints who from beneath the altar have unceasingly cried, “ How long, O Lord, holy and true ”—the souls that have been oppressed for Christ's coming—the men of prayer and of deep holy thought, and of familiarity with Heaven, who have kept the doors open between this world below and that world above, and have been in that way as conductors of the heavenly grace, bringing it down on the Church, and on the cause of good against evil, as “ rain on the mown grass, and as showers that water the earth.” Shall we ever know the vast proportion of power and result that have so descended to us on the plain, from the silent veiled hill-tops of prayer? Suppose, at this moment, the veil thrust back, and all those who bow the knee at the blessed Name, and what they do, revealed to us ; how *little* would the hurry and the power put forth in the arena of the Church's public activity appear !—how *grand* the power exercised from closets, and from sick-pallets, and from the high spots of prayer ! And is this not so specially, that not

only the poor and the solitary and the feeble and the sorrowful, may all take home, that, in their very helplessness, if they but "pray without ceasing," they become channels to the great Church, of God's richest power? But is it not so specially to check the strong and full-blooded and energetic in the tendency there always is in the world to lean to action more than prayer—to check those who allow a kind of recluse place to prayer, but who make by far the most important business to consist in the stir of work—who, while they pray, feel its efficacy nothing, but while they *do* somewhat—spend money, preach, visit the sick and poor, organise schemes and efforts, feel that these are all in all? God would rebuke that spirit, and teach that the nobler force of the two, after all, is prayer: that, not only in the Church at large, but in each soul, it is ~~the~~ force nearer heaven—it is the side which receives light, without which the other side of action is confused and dark; it is the side which is suffused with grace, without which the other side of action labours unanointed and poor; it is the side of fire from God, without which the other side of action, after all its effort and battle, must, without real result, ultimately faint and die. Let the weakest, then, rejoice in this certain strength of prayer; and let the strongest, as he wages action in the name of Christ, get him, ever and anon, from the dust-cloud of the plain, up to the hill-top of prayer, alone with God.

But it is noticeable also, that while Moses loftily upbore the staff of God, he owed his power to do so to the end to the help of two much inferior men. Aaron and Hur beside him, first propped his exhausted frame upon a stone seat; then with their hands they upheld his failing arms. If they had not been there, or if they had allowed Moses to droop, the cause of Israel would have been lost. And who, then, unsustained, can go alone to God? Let his hands be consecrated by holiest work, and his heart "full of faith and power," who can venture for one hour to plead with God, isolated and alone. Even the Lord Jesus, in the mighty floodtide of His sorrow, shrank from going into the garden darkness alone: He took three disciples to watch with Him, and far, far beneath Him as they were in their poor, rude life, He would fain have seen their faces near Him praying in the moonlight, He would have leaned upon their shoulders as He poured out His own soul to God. And, after Christ, the great leaders in His cause in all time—have they not turned eagerly to their brethren, even the feeblest, for the help of prayer? When in some arduous hour there has passed a cold shiver over them, and when they should have been strongest they have suddenly sank back weakest, has it not been because the breath of prayer round them has chilled and died? And when, on the contrary, they have mounted into courage with the crisis, and in *their high calling* communed no more with flesh and

blood, but have been as those inspired, has it not been that the glow of prayer round them has become a flame, and its hundred upholding arms as very buttresses of strength? That cause, therefore, is the strongest which is deepest bathed in others' prayers—that life rises noblest that has most praying hands stretched towards it, bidding it God-speed. The pole and framework of the desert tent are, in themselves, strong, and look well fixed; but let one gust of wind come and they are overturned; whereas, stretch out cord by cord, fastening the framework all round to the earth—each cord is in itself slim and weak, but the network of the whole holds the strong erection fast, so that even in the sweeping storm it still stands secure. So let the chiefest in the ranks of Christ—let the lofty doer of His word—let the patient sufferer of His will—feel the blessing, nay, the necessity, of being held up each day in the hands of prayer; the words that go up to God for us may be from very ignorant lips, and in a poor and faltering form, but even by that aid it is we stand fast in the Lord: and high as well as low learn the lesson, that, in suffering in rejoicing, in good in ill, in life in death, no man is, before God, alone; but we are all “members one of another.” Be it so, then, my reader, that, whether in battle in the plain, or on our several hill-spots of prayer, while we each in the measure of our strength hold up the ensign of our God, we all turn to one another humbly and un-

ashamedly for the help we need—and thus giving and receiving help, that we all not less often look up to the heavenly hill-top, where, crowning the ten thousand watch-heights of earth, there is the place of Him before God, of Whom Moses was but the shadow—that glorious High Priest, in Whose might we overcome, Who bears aloft there the shining staff of His Cross, the true *Jehovah-Nissi*, and Who, in virtue of its prevalency with the Father, “ever liveth and maketh intercession for us!”



## CHAPTER XI.

### Division of Labour.



I SUPPOSE the encampment of Israel lingered in a grateful quiet; for some time after the battle of Rephidim, beside the coveted palm-groves which, as we have said, were scattered in the valley. It was a famed oasis of the desert—at least, in our later times, it is known far and wide for its palms, and tamarisks, and pleasant brooks, and green sward; and with some reason it is believed, that, in the eye of Moses, it was not only such a cherished spot, but by the desert tribes was regarded, moreover, as the chosen recess of their gods, who wandered in the cool glades below, or had their dwelling on the vast sun-scorched pinnacles of rock above. There it was, then, withdrawn from the heat, and yet with the red sun glorious on the great peaks round them, the Israelites rested at peace. It was a breathing space between their past scenes of trial, and the dread scenes that next awaited them on Sinai—and the pause must have been memorable and deep.

It was in this interval there took place by the way an event of beautiful and touching interest. The fame of Israel's escape out of Egypt, and all the signs of God round it, had pierced to Midian, quite on the other

side of the wilderness—and journeying thence, Jethro, the aged priest of Midian, hastened to meet Moses, his son-in-law, bringing with him Zipporah, Moses' wife, and their two sons. These had waited in their desert home the issue of the great errand on which Moses had gone into Egypt. Now, after so long and so wondrous a tale between, the family group met. Moses hastened out of the camp to do honour to the patriarch as he came : and, with all the kindly Eastern salutations, the Midianite train were ushered to the tents. Then was rehearsed to Jethro all that God had done in the deliverance and guiding of His people, till the old man involuntarily must have raised his eyes to the mountain ridges round them, supposed to be the home of the desert gods, and extolled that Mighty One of Israel, Who was infinitely above them all. Solemn sacrifices closed the narrative ; and thereafter, sitting down, the mingled circle, in their serious gladness, ate and drank together. So the night fell : and the camp, lit only by the pillar of God glowing on the rocks, and high beyond that the shining of the clear stars, was hushed in repose. It was the quiet of God-watched sleep.

Next morning, however, the stir of laborious life began anew : and of all the men within the camp, none woke to one tithe the burden that lay on the heart of their leader Moses. He could not spare even one day's *leisure* for his venerable guest ; but, taking Jethro with

him, in the early morning he sat down in the judge's seat, and from that time till late at even again, heard patiently the never-ceasing throng of the people, as, with their multifold controversies and causes, they flocked about him, and judged them all. By eventide his strength was gone, and his eye dim : and then it was Jethro, who had intently watched all day, arrested him with a striking remonstrance as to his taking on him more than he could bear ; shewed him how mind and body, that should be reserved for other and far grander tasks, in the huge sum of these petty details would waste and perish ; and sketched out to him a simple scheme, such as his own experience of desert rule had taught him, whereby the enormous and unreasonable labour should be divided—the people should be distributed in regular sections and grades—rulers and judges, ascertained to be men of God, should be named for each—*they* should judge the small matters, and the hard and great causes only should be brought to Moses. It was a system, in a word, by which Moses should multiply himself ; do through the hands and heads of others an hundredfold the work he vainly toiled to do alone ; and yet, unexhausted, dwell at the centre of the network, moving it, and controlling it all.

It was a scheme commended at once by its plain sense. And yet it might, in its proposal by Jethro, have made many a man, other than the meek and noble servant of God, shrink. For only think what a

difference between these two—Moses, and the white-haired desert chief—since last they parted. *Then*, Jethro certainly his superior in wealth and place—*then*, Moses but the shepherd of his flocks; *then*, Jethro head of a powerful tribe—*then*, Moses going forth on his solitary and forlorn path to speak God's message to the king of Egypt: *now*, Moses the hero of an hundred events, of which the whole world had heard, leader of a people in whose presence Jethro and his tribe were as an handful, and in the vigorous prime of an influence and power the aged hands of Jethro, no more than the hands of a child, could grasp. Was there not temptation to despise the old chieftain's counsel, to cling obstinately to a great rule like his in Israel, that even while it broke his strength, he dared not, and could not part with, nay, to retort on Jethro that his poor commonplace wisdom was but folly! Yet the gentle single heart of Moses bowed itself to be taught; to see only what was best for the honour and the work of God; and, in *that* one view, to adopt Jethro's judgment as far better than his own. So the labour of his high office in Israel came to be divided. It must have cost him not a little to let go his hold on so many poor hearts, that, from every corner of the camp, looked up to him; but he nobly denied himself, if so be, even for these poor hearts' sake, he might, by stripping himself of a burden that, though heavy, was dear, *be more free to follow after the deep things of God.*

Now, my reader, this spirit that was in Moses was surely a pattern spirit for us. Nothing is so hurtful often in the labour-field of God as the tenacity with which many natures cling to an influence, they yet waste mind and strength in seeking to wield, and wield after all imperfectly. Need I point to the misery a parent brings upon himself by the minute enforcement of his rule in every turn and detail of his children's daily life, till he jades his own heart in the task, and tortures into half-rebellion theirs? Or to the wearing sadness of a minister of Christ who is on the constant stretch to keep up control in a wide and distracting charge, who cannot consent to let one point escape him, who is at work ever and yet work never finished, who, even in his hours of rest, is preyed upon by the rising spectres of to-morrow, and whose strength gives way and his life sinks, greatly indeed by what labour he has done, but far more by the grief and the misery of that labour which, after all his straining, he is obliged to leave undone? How many high-gifted ministries broken after but a short flight, and how many early graves, tell this sorrowful tale! Yet I would by no means plead for the work, on this account, being even partially abandoned, or for the ardour of the overstrained heart being succeeded by a negligent and cool indifference. That extreme again is certainly far worse, and more reprehensible than the other. On the contrary, I would plead for whatsoever charge is

given us of God, being held to with intensest earnestness ; but let the manner of its management be changed. Let the labour be divided. Let the parent in his sphere so become a living power of piety, as that he shall translate himself round and round into the hearts of his children—he shall control them not by word but by silent influence—each shall be his parent's deputy to himself. Let the minister of Christ in his sphere imbue with his own spirit those standing next him in his flock, transfuse himself forth, not in rules or forms, but in love, in life, in power, so that the weight of his great mission shall no longer rest with himself—he shall have fifty round him like-minded—he shall have the whole circle more or less smitten with his own zeal, and fellow-workers spontaneously with him in the work of God. There would be as great a difference between such a management and the wretched ineffectiveness of a close, unshared personal control, as there is between the man who should think to move into play a piece of vast machinery by the foolish and exhausting mode of applying all his strength to turn a large outside wheel an inch here, to push home a mighty shaft an inch there—and the man who, seating himself at the centre, touches one all-communicating spring, lets on the jet of steam or water, and, by that calm and easy process, brings the whole gleaming labyrinth into action. The one case is as the wasted energies of Moses, up to Jethro's visit ; the other as



the simple thorough rule of Moses, after he had laid Jethro's words to heart.

True, we are often hard to be convinced in letting conscious authority, even though it involve wearing labour, slip from our hands. We cling to *felt* rather than to *silent* power. We have far more faith in the *work* we do than in the *life* we live. And then, we are jealous of the thing committed to us, or the place to which we have laboriously climbed, being shared by others. We *must* hold by every jot and tittle—we *must* feel out our influence to its last details; otherwise, we are harassed by a sense of loss and wrong. How frequently does this spirit of absorbing rule and work spoil an able ministry—change its very heart from an earnest single passion for God into a mean and pitiable passion for self! And how fruitless the result; for the hand that insists on holding all the reins must one day die. Who is then to take up the task—who, under the narrow, jealous rule, has had scope so that, when the leader is gone, there are twenty, or ten, or *one*, ready to assume his place?—with his own death, does his whole work, of years it may be, not crumble like a rope of sand? Besides, it is surely melancholy that, in the work of Christ, any one should grudge the passing forth of control and influence from himself to others. Who are we that we should think to shut up in our petty cistern, and restrain there, the deep stream that is flowing ever from the throne of God? Nay, is it

not the very end we labour for, that we are to make others incessantly partakers of our gifts—that we are to kindle in others, and bid go forth, the light in us—that though, in that circle of expanding light, we ourselves should pale to nothing, we are yet to rejoice that the glorious Christ is fast becoming all things? Has this not been the high self-abnegation of every true servant of the Cross? Was it not the spirit that dwelt in Moses, when he resigned so much to which the natural love of power clung, that God's work might be better done, and His people better led? Was it not John Baptist's spirit, when he rejoiced in himself decreasing, that the Lamb of God might increase—when he parted with his waning influence without a sigh—when, like the star of morning, fading, yet hurrying on into the depths of the uprising sun, he yielded the glory of his ministry, that it might pass on and be lost in the great ministry of Christ? And is this not the aim of all of us, however sadly we miss it, however sadly, being set to unveil the Christ, we yet come between, and darken His beauty with our own unholy shadow?

Let us not, then, my reader, despise this lesson of humility and wisdom we may learn, seated in thought beside Moses and the patriarch Jethro, that evening long ago, in their quiet desert tent.

CHAPTER XII.

*The Inaccessible Glory.*



On the fiftieth day after the flight from Egypt—a day, fifteen centuries later, destined, not without meaning, to become the celebrated Pentecost of Christians—the spectacle of Jehovah's descent on Sinai took place. By the long sloping valleys or water-courses that converge to that awful centre, the Israelites had slowly moved on into the upland plain, where the mountain masses, retiring upon themselves, leave wider space for the spread of a great multitude, and for the transaction before all their eyes of those sublime scenes that were now to ensue. Nothing could be more imposing than the march up to this central plain. The rugged defiles, black overhead hitherto, gradually opened on its light—then, as the pilgrim throng advanced, the twenty different avenues through which they came resolved themselves into one long vista, stretching itself on and widening before the eye—the frowning hills fell back—the broad approach, with its columned crags on either side, alone filled the eye—and far at its extremity, growing larger at every step in the streaming light, and standing up as if alone against the sky, there rose the single, dark, solid cliff of what was now to be

the mount of God. Along the approach to this high altar came the multitude of Israel—slowly, silently, we may be sure, for the spot lay in the desert's heart ; it was the very home of desolate sublimity ; in the air there was not even the sound of the dash of a waterfall, or so much as a brook's murmur ; all was so deathlike in silence that a voice raised a little rang with unearthliness, or a stone, dislodged from the hill-side, rolled with the noise of thunder ; and it is no stretch to think that the place was hushed already for the coming of the Mighty God. There then, dispersing themselves into long lines upon the plain, the people "camped before the mount."

The quiet of deep expectation next succeeded. First of all, God summoned Moses to the mountain-top ; probably, the light wreath of the cloudy pillar had settled there, and God talked with His servant from its screen. The people were required to make a covenant with Heaven of a very solemn and a very tender kind ; and, with this preliminary charge, Moses went down. Presently, bearing the ready consent of the whole people, he climbed again to God ; and next, was charged to prepare the camp, to sanctify priests and people, for on the third day, God would descend in thick clouds in the sight of all. So the process of a purifying solemnity was held throughout the host ; and on the eve of the third day, all was done.

*How intently must the first dawn have been watched*

next day, as it came ruddily along the hills. The pilared fire had likely been seen on the great altar-hill all night; now, in the clear amber air, it gave sudden birth to thunder, reverberating an hundredfold in the silence—it streamed with the zigzag play of lightning—it rolled itself out in thick clouds, dense as the folds of night—its billows falling like loosened garments over cliff and scaur, till the whole mount was hidden, and the curling vapour rose in a column vast and black to heaven—and finally, from its breast there pealed a trumpet “exceeding loud.” Surely no moment could be conceived more awful than that in which Moses then led the people out beneath the mount to meet God; yet, as they clustered there, the dark pall on Sinai waxed yet deeper, fire seamed it in red flashes, the whole mount, under the descending feet of God, was as a smoking furnace, and its deep foundations rocked. Then the trumpet notes again, clear as silver, and streaming on, and increasing, till the hills redoubled them into a thousand echoes, made the whole desert world tremulous to its heart. Who could bear it farther? It was terror mounting up to exquisite anguish—when, at that point, “Moses spake, and God answered him with a voice.”

How that voice must have fallen on the ears of Israel! Was it as “the voice of the Lord,” sung afterwards in one of the great strains of David as “shaking the wilderness,” or was it the “still small voice” of

Elijah, whispering startlingly in each heart? At any rate, it was the summons to Moses once more to ascend the mount; and, in the gaze of the whole people accordingly, his solitary figure was seen wending upward and vanishing behind the veil. It is at this point we are made to mark that he and Aaron alone were thought worthy thus to pierce into the unseen. God, though so near His people, would not be unveiled to all; they must be barriered off on the edge of the holy ground, till they had deeper insight, purer conceptions, higher faith; and therefore it was that, wrapping up Moses under the shadows and the secrecy of the mountain-top, His first and repeated charge to him was, to warn Israel, priests and people, that not one foot should dare cross into the precincts of the mount, lest, God breaking forth upon them, they should die. It was to be a ring of fire and awfulness impassable; at that moment, the trembling in the people's heart would be sure to keep them back safe enough, but the fire-enveloped hill would by and by become familiar, and the sight of Moses passing and repassing breed a desire and a daring in the hardier of the lookers-on to follow; so, in case that rash venture should be made, it is striking that, in the first interview, God had nought to press on Moses but that he should return to the people, warn them of the inaccessible glory, and that he who broke through into the mount should die.

Now we shall see presently more of the scenes in



Sinai ; but at this point we must ask, why the Israelites were shut off so jealously from seeing their own chosen and covenanted God—why brought so near as the mountain's base, and yet not allowed to climb a few steps on the mountain's side—why, beholding everything of power and greatness, just to the veil's edge, and yet forbidden on pain of death to pass into the interior glory? We may answer, as we have already virtually done, that, with many organs in them awakened to behold the dread signs of God, there was yet the deepest chord of all—the capacity to see and know God Himself—unawakened. Hence the utterable things—the fire and smoke, on the outside of Sinai—they could gaze on palpable enough ; but had they been taken *within* the fire and smoke, and confronted with the unutterable things Moses saw there, the sight, to their unpurged senses, would have been a blank. Just as, for example, if we suppose two shepherds on the plain of Bethlehem on our Saviour's birth-night, one gifted with the spiritual heart, the other not ; to *both* the glory in the broad sky, when angels appeared, and their song was heard, and the whole night was lit up, would have been the same—awe-striking, full of God ; but if both ran to find the Divine Child where He lay, and did find Him in the inn stable, wrapped in swaddling-clothes, and laid in a manger ; while the one would be persuaded here in this inner spot was “God manifest in the flesh,” and

would bow down and worship ; the other, unbelieving, would look on this, the end of so many dread portents, as lame and impotent, and probably pronounce it either a mockery or a lie. So with Moses and the mass of Israelites : he on the hidden steep of Sinai had the pure vision to discern God ; they in the plain could look at the billowy and flaming grandeur of His robes ; but if admitted to the great shrine where Moses was admitted, they would, from want of gift, have so failed to see, that they would not only not have had their curiosity met, but would have disbelieved and been hardened worse than ever. In true knowledge of their state, therefore, God set bounds at the foot of Sinai, to cross which into His hidden dwelling He decreed would be death.

And the same invisible law prevails now. "Except a man be born again," said Jesus, uttering that law, "he cannot *see*," much less can he enter, "the kingdom of God." And (as the instant consequence) to seek to press into the kingdom, without that spiritual capacity, is ruinous as death. The impure and world-steeped heart, for example, has an instinct of religion it cannot rid itself of ; but when it turns to do its religious worship,—to find, in short, and to see God,—what debased images of God it conjures up—either as One Who may be propitiated with bribes, and cheated with hypocrisies—or, where the conscience is more fear-awakened, as One dark with anger, and beneath His feet the

torments of the pit. In either of these cases, is not the base and slavish worship such as, for the soul, worketh death? Or the worship of the impenitent, formal heart—what do *its* lifelong comings to see God result in but in reducing all conception of God to the dead stone of ordinance and form; and the soul, going on contented in that worship,—can it in the end do otherwise than die,—is it not smitten with its own death already? Or the intellectual seeker after God—how fares *he* in his attempt to pierce the veil? Alas! do we not know on what miserable rafts of speculation intellect has again and again put off its devotees into the shoreless deep? And who by this searching has ever found out God? We grant the deep fascination of the quest—we grant the strong ardour with which the natural mind has often risen to the problem,—nay, we are aware of the passionate absorbedness with which again and again intellect has plumbed its way forward in its search for God, and, when its poor, short line has found no bottom, has, in its sorrow, cried, like Job, “Oh that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come even to His seat!” But with all that, we know too, what, again and again, the penalty has been—how the ground of truth and faith has, inch by inch, crumbled—how all footing has been lost, and gifted spirits, that might have been as clear lamps in the heaven of our world, through daring scepticism, and the folly on folly which the forthputting of mere intellect

has bred, have fallen from their orbit, and become as wandering stars, dropping into the blackness of darkness for ever.

So, to this day, there is no man, unprepared, can break through the bounds God has set about Himself, and live. What would it be, even suppose those who seek God, not in *His* way, but *theirs*, were to find and see Him,—suppose the impure, the formalist, the keen and subtle sceptic, had some conceivable power of passing into God's presence, and beholding Him as He is,—would the sight be joy or sorrow—would the chord struck between them be congratulation—and would each of these, on the veil lifting, be satisfied with God's likeness? Yea, has it not been recorded for us that, when such as these do come into the presence of the High and Holy One, as in the judgment of the great day, the very face of God and of the Lamb strikes terror; in that God they know at once they have no part or lot, and, as they turn to flee from Him, they invoke the hills and the rocks to fall on them and cover them! Is not this enough to bring home to us the dread boundary-line set about God? No matter what the nobleness of life or the gift of mind; as to this point, the people of Israel were sanctified, and the priests doubly so; yet neither dared, without the one heart-spot of light, cross into the mount. Oh! there is no way for us through the barrier but the simple path up which *Moses* climbed, written first on its gateway, "Except

ye be converted and become as a little child, ye cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven," and written after on its upward steps, "Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God!" There are a thousand, like the Israelite multitude, can see the signs of God; but there is only one in the thousand, like Moses, can penetrate and see God Himself. My reader, have *you* the secret way—the always converted heart? Does God bid you at the edge stand off? or does He call you up into the mount, and bid you come nigh? Times there are in your pilgrimage, when, even in your own soul, you know the difference—times of cold shade, for example, when your love is low, your life worldly, your prayers faint,—you feel then the blind drawn between you and God, and the boundary for the time set you cannot pass. Only again when the chill film is removed off eye and heart, and the baptism of the Spirit is renewed, have you power to fly to God as doves to their windows. Would you not then learn, even from *that*, to keep the pure flame of an always converted life in you,—mindful that, if you would frequent the mount, this is the way—mindful that, if you would see God, this is the glass—and mindful that, even one dark and forsaken hour outside at the foot of the mount is enough to shew you a miserable change—enough to make you tremble with the words, "Our God is a consuming fire!"



CHAPTER XIII.

“The Voice of Words.”





No one can tell how the accents of the living God dropped from the flaming mount. There was no similitude seen, no hand flinging back the drapery of smoke and fire, no face gleaming even dimly, no lips forming the august speech ; but the voice was without doubt articulately heard. And heard too by how great an audience ! On the hills, amidst the fire, and in the air, thousands and tens of thousands of the throng of heaven ; for, from several passages in Scripture,\* it is clear that, when God came down on Sinai, His feet were borne on the wings of angels, their hands set His throne and hung the vast curtains of His tent. And in the plain the many thousands of Israel,—Moses conspicuously in front, and their dark groups still as death. The fire-wreathed brow of Sinai then grew for the time calm ; the air, thick with palpitating angels, listened above—the pilgrim hearts, scarce breathing, listened below ; such was the audience,—and from the bosom of the great calm God spake. Was it not now such a voice as was to be heard

\* Gal. iii. 19 ; Heb. ii. 2 ; Deut. xxxiii. 2 ; Ps. lxxviii. 7, 8-17 ; Ps. xlviii. 7-11.

generations after in that very desert-region, where the Hebrew prophet should lurk in his mountain cave and witness the earthquake, the strong wind, and the fire—but the Lord not in these; and then, as if revealing the deeper presence that lay beneath the dread magnificence of these, there should tremble in his ear the still small voice, and he should know God to be *there*? Was it not so with the Israelites now, that within the sheath of terror—at the heart of the fire, and the blackness, and the darkness, and the tempest, and the sound of a trumpet—there was God Himself speaking in the “still small voice?” All the elements of earth and heaven wrought into a storm-winged envelope outside—but this the true revelation of the God of Israel in its spot of stillness at the heart! At all events what the “voice of words” uttered, as it went on from one precept to another of God’s great and holy law, *was* such a discovery. For although, when the sublime series of commandments was complete, and the voice had ceased, the tempestuous signs rolled round Sinai again; and, passing suddenly from the hush into the tumult, from the clear speaking of the words of God, into the wrath and roar of elements, the people, affrighted, fell back upon the plain afar off, and entreated Moses he would stand between them and God, and that they might hear the intolerable piercingness of that voice no more; yet they *had* heard what neither in their ears nor hearts *could* ever die—heard, in effect, that these volumed dark-

nesses on Sinai were but the shroud and not the reality of God—that penetrating through their veil, lifting the screen of His majesty, going within the flaming of His power, there was found beneath all these, as the region where He himself dwelt, and whence He spake to His people, not terror, not blackness, not consuming fire any more, but the words of truth, and love, and blessedness, written at the heart. In the law now given them from that hidden place, and which was graven after by the finger of God on tables of stone, they had thus made the deepest and dearest discovery of Him, to be theirs for ever.

In passing through the countries they explore, travellers are sometimes enveloped in the hurrying rack of cloud and storm—every feature of the land is blotted out, and the eye meets nothing but the blind confusion of the elements. But suppose at some point the steps are arrested by a moment's pause in the storm—a sudden break opens in the wide swathe of mist, and through that rent there streams one long shoot of sunshine, revealing but a glimpse of some green and lovely spot: the clouds may sweep in again more darkly, and the tempest rise more in wrath than ever; but it is not their wildness, or their waste, the traveller carries away as his deepest impression of the region, it is his memory of the sweet patch of landscape that just beamed upon him and was lost. So to the Israelites, not the thunder-gloom and wrath of

Sinai, but the declaration of the Voice reading forth, in the brief calm, the simple, beautiful, but eternal words of God's holy law,—it was *that* we must suppose left the deepest imprint of Sinai on their minds. And cannot we confirm the experience by the yet more vivid and certain discovery of the blessed God unveiled to *us*? We cannot find God such that we can draw nigh to Him in either the storms or calm of nature. Creation is too high and remote for us, and has such an overwhelming sense of its dark and cold majesty to throw upon us, that if we are not made to shrink from it altogether, we become at best like him who, without any gospel light, having explored all nature's greatness, concluded his quest by the blank declaration, that there was no God. Nor are we happier in our attempts to pierce through the veil of Providence—its workings, as well as those of Creation, are as vast wheels round us, that go on inexorably, and whose girth touches the heavens above, and again the depths beneath—we can only say about them, as is said in Scripture, "that whosoever falls on them shall be broken; and on whomsoever *they* shall fall, they shall grind him to powder." Where, then, in the majesty of nature—whether in its still smile, or in its tempest fury—where shall we find the spot for the trembling and the seeking heart to rest? Where, through the dim shroud, is there the break for us of light from heaven? *Where, in all the dread movement and expanse, is*

there the discovery of our God? Need I tell you, that, were our Bibles blotted out, and all we learn from them lost, cold and voiceless indeed would be the circles of the dead universe we gaze on; we should discover how vain and miserable the creeds would be we should then form, by the process, of which so many have foolishly talked, of rising from nature up to nature's God: nature *might* intimate to us, that her broad garment was the robe of some Being veiled in awfulness behind; but, as to one shining of His face to us, one accent of His voice, nature would remain for ever dumb and dark—she would be our Sinai, appalling us, and making us stand afar off, but with no glimpse into her heart.

But now, my reader, blessed be our God, He has folded back the thick clouds of nature—He has torn the veil off all those dim attributes of power nature speaks of, and, through that opening in the gospel of His Son, the weakest child of grace can enter with a steady step where the greatest philosopher has faltered. He can enter through that door into the mighty temple of all things, and no more feel dwarfed or overwhelmed, but find there God, discovered by Himself in Jesus Christ,—in the person, in the nearness, in the lowly way on earth, in the bleeding cross of Him Who is the “brightness of the Father's glory, and the express image of His person.” I say, he can make this discovery of the High and Lofty One who inhabiteth eternity; and not only so, but this discovery becomes the palpable possession

of his heart,—“Christ dwells in his heart by faith,”—and in that glorious property there,—in the working and the breathing and the unworded speech within him of the Holy Spirit, whereby the loveliness and the realness of that property are revealed to him yet more day by day,—the child of grace catches the full imprint of God ; not a distant voice, as the Israelites heard and feared from Sinai ; not words floating to the outward ear, as the commandments of the law did to them ; but a new covenant, an unarticulated law of love, “written not on tables of stone, but in the fleshy table of the heart.” *There* now is God’s impress in Christ ; and he who possesses that has such a fearlessness in facing all the dread problems of the universe, that, after he has stood by the side of David and heard the exclamation, as they together gaze through the starry night, “When I consider the heavens, the work of Thy fingers ; the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained ; what is man that Thou art mindful of him ? and the son of man that Thou visitest him ?” he can quietly feel that that God is *not* unmindful—that, from the silence and the vastness of nature, He has come forth to *him* ; although the heaven of heavens cannot contain Him, He has knocked at the door of *his* heart, He has come in and supped with him, and he with God.

Have we not, then, good ground to glory in this heart discovery of God ? If I be a preacher of the Cross, I *may* be but a poor interpreter of the hard questions of

the day, to which subtle intellects would summon me,—questions of the surrounding darknesses and confusions and inexorable necessities, whereby nature and reason, they say, environ the doctrines of our faith. I may not be able to throw many rays of light on these questions, nor may I have a torch to guide me in the steps of those men who, in our day, overdoing their own subtlety, shew us a grievous specimen of those who are “in wandering mazes lost.” But I can set all these things aside as but the thick clouds on Sinai,—as but the darknesses that roll under the feet of God; and going through the door in Christ, I can lead poor, trembling sinners past them all, straight into the heart of God Himself. I may not interpret what the dread universe either utters or threatens; but I can interpret that love here at hand which says, through the lips of Christ, “Come unto Me, all ye that labour, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

Or, if I am a pilgrim in God’s path, hard beset by evil and by trial, I may not be able to expound those laws of fate, whose iron force an infidel spirit never ceases to suggest, and before which, if I looked only them in the face, I should cease to strive, and should be borne down. Nature teaches these blind laws; and all the outside mechanism of life and death about us in its dreary surface-look seems everywhere to utter them; but I can turn away my sight and eyes to Him Who, through iron law and dead force, says, in a living voice,

"I will not leave you comfortless : I will come to you ;" and then the day breaks, and the evil shadows flee away.

Or, if I am in the seclusion of loneliness and pain, I may not be able to answer to the enemy's suggestions, that my sick-room or my unnoticed way in life are but spots in the measureless world,—that they are lost to God's sight by reason of their smallness and insignificance,—and, while He is ordering the high events of that world, how can He stoop to or remember me? But I can take the volume of my God from beneath my pillow, and, though feeble be the hand that turns the hundred pages of its promise, I can light almost at the first on such words as these, "Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands." *Then* I can recall Him over these words by the cry of prayer; I can realise the light from Him breaking round my bed; I can hear His voice saying, "The very hairs of your head are all numbered;" I can feel the spot where I am laid already as a Beulah-light from other spheres upon me, the secret of that God the great outer world would darken brightly with me, and already, as it were, sighing from the upper rest, "No more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither any more pain."

Yes, verily; although it be written that, when the temple of God is opened in heaven, there are "lightnings and voices, and thunderings, and an earthquake, and *great hail*," that is but as the dark shell of Sinai—in the

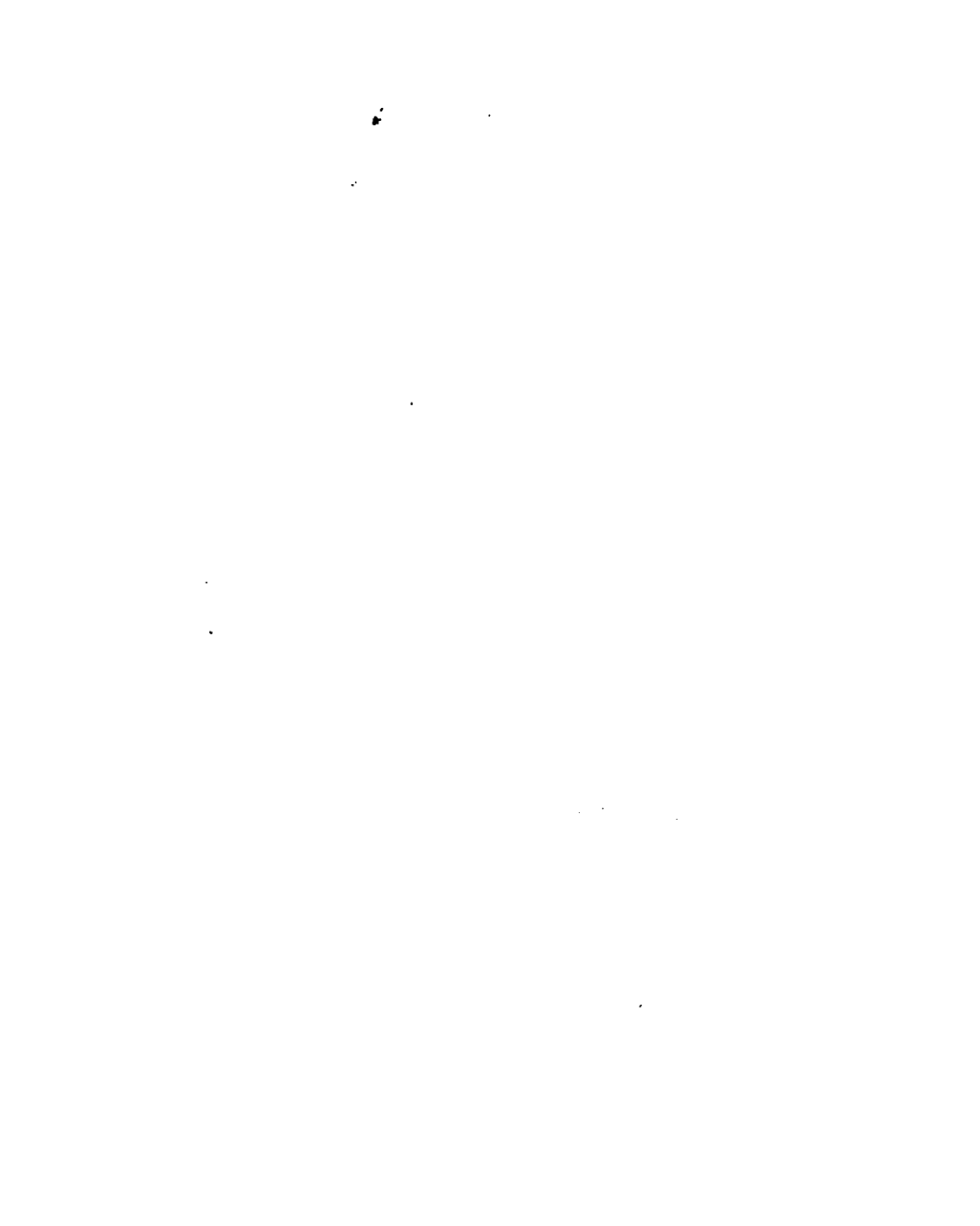


hidden kernel here is the deeper voice—"Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes ; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain : for the former things are passed away !"



CHAPTER XIV.

*The Similitude of God.*



THERE was a long space, during which Moses abode under the fringe of the thick darkness on Sinai, detained there until God had spoken to him many sentences of law for the worship and the life of Israel. But suddenly there came a break in that high interview, and one of those passages occurred, which, in the story of the Israelite pilgrimage, arrest most deeply the reader's eye and memory. God bade Moses select Aaron, with his sons Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders—aged, silver-headed representatives of the people, we doubt not—and with that company, (in which also we should say Joshua was included,) to come up unto the Lord. Accordingly, making way for this commission, Moses brought all Israel together, got their assent again to the body of precepts God had sent them down, and building an altar under the hill, the upper stone to be the table of sacrifice before God, its twelve pillars to signify the twelve Israel tribes, called on them to ratify their assent with fear. The youth of the camp, meaning, so to speak, Israel's first, unspotted strength, stood forward as priests of the occasion, slaying the sacrifice. Moses then, catching the blood,

Sinai, but the declaration of the Voice reading forth, in the brief calm, the simple, beautiful, but eternal words of God's holy law,—it was *that* we must suppose left the deepest imprint of Sinai on their minds. And cannot we confirm the experience by the yet more vivid and certain discovery of the blessed God unveiled to *us*? We cannot find God such that we can draw nigh to Him in either the storms or calm of nature. Creation is too high and remote for us, and has such an overwhelming sense of its dark and cold majesty to throw upon us, that if we are not made to shrink from it altogether, we become at best like him who, without any gospel light, having explored all nature's greatness, concluded his quest by the blank declaration, that there was no God. Nor are we happier in our attempts to pierce through the veil of Providence—its workings, as well as those of Creation, are as vast wheels round us, that go on inexorably, and whose girth touches the heavens above, and again the depths beneath—we can only say about them, as is said in Scripture, "that whosoever falls on them shall be broken; and on whomsoever *they* shall fall, they shall grind him to powder." Where, then, in the majesty of nature—whether in its still smile, or in its tempest fury—where shall we find the spot for the trembling and the seeking heart to rest? Where, through the dim shroud, is there the break for us of light from heaven? *Where*, in all the dread movement and expanse, is

there the discovery of our God? Need I tell you, that, were our Bibles blotted out, and all we learn from them lost, cold and voiceless indeed would be the circles of the dead universe we gaze on; we should discover how vain and miserable the creeds would be we should then form, by the process, of which so many have foolishly talked, of rising from nature up to nature's God: nature *might* intimate to us, that her broad garment was the robe of some Being veiled in awfulness behind; but, as to one shining of His face to us, one accent of His voice, nature would remain for ever dumb and dark—she would be our Sinai, appalling us, and making us stand afar off, but with no glimpse into her heart.

But now, my reader, blessed be our God, He has folded back the thick clouds of nature—He has torn the veil off all those dim attributes of power nature speaks of, and, through that opening in the gospel of His Son, the weakest child of grace can enter with a steady step where the greatest philosopher has faltered. He can enter through that door into the mighty temple of all things, and no more feel dwarfed or overwhelmed, but find there God, discovered by Himself in Jesus Christ, —in the person, in the nearness, in the lowly way on earth, in the bleeding cross of Him Who is the “brightness of the Father's glory, and the express image of His person.” I say, he can make this discovery of the High and Lofty One who inhabiteth eternity; and not only so, but this discovery becomes the palpable possession

Sinai, but the declaration of the Voice real in the brief calm, the simple, beautiful, the words of God's holy law,—it was *that* we must leave the deepest imprint of Sinai on their minds. We cannot confirm the experience by the yet and certain discovery of the blessed God *us*? We cannot find God such that we can find Him in either the storms or calm of nature. Creation is too high and remote for us, and the overwhelming sense of its dark and cold throw upon us, that if we are not made to see it altogether, we become at best like him without any gospel light, having explored all nature's and concluded his quest by the blank declaration was no God. Nor are we happier in our quest to pierce through the veil of Providence—its as well as those of Creation, are as vast without us, that go on inexorably, and whose gifts the heavens above, and again the depths below can only say about them, as is said in Scripture: whosoever falls on them shall be broken; whomsoever *they* shall fall, they shall be broken. powder." Where, then, is the majesty of God whether in its stillness or in its storm? Where shall we find the God of the seeking heart to whom the shroud, is there the breath of life? Where, in all



CHAPTER XIII.

“The Voice of Words.”

mercy and of utter peace ! And it would have been no gain had the flames ceased to be shot from their volcanic ridge ; had they so ceased, the symbol would have been mutilated of half its sublime meaning, for the glory of the spectacle was that the fire-robed righteousness of God needed to be seen above, that it might excite a just and holy fear ; while, falling in its tongues on the deep calm below, it brought the assurance home that the twain in the one blessed God were one ; that the wrath no longer reigned to the sinner's death, but, while justly due, was caught, and every moment quenched, in the sea-like depth of love underneath ; that, in a word, as Scripture itself has described, " Mercy and truth had met together, righteousness and peace had kissed each other."

That, then, was, I think, the glorious shadowing forth Moses and his company beheld in Sinai. The *reality* appears to us now, my reader, in Him " Who is the image of the Invisible God." Take our Lord, if you will, first in His Incarnation. Above, as on the ridges of heaven, there was the intolerable and burning God-head from which He came, and which, from its background, still threw its glories down upon Him on the earth ; but then, below, in His human guise, there was the contrasted and beauteous calm. He was the meek and lowly Jesus. He in His human body and life was " holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners ;" as *it were*, over again, the sapphire floor, and the body of

heaven in its clearness. We could not have drawn nigh to Him in the upper glories of His Godhead ; but these were withheld from us ; ever, as they broke forth, they dropped and disappeared in that Saviour-form we *can* approach, full, in its earthly way, of human tenderness and peace.

Or, take our Lord in His Atonement—in His whole obedience unto death. He set forth, again and again, the picture of the wrath above,—the subduing love into which He drank it away continually below. On the lake, for instance, when the storm-wind arose, there was the murky rage of nature darkening the air, and sweeping with the frown of death, overhead ; there was the still, sleeping Christ, His head pillowed on the plank, beneath—image full of the light and peace of heaven ; and when He rose at the disciple's cry, He spake but one word, and there was a great calm. Into the stillness of His mercy wind and wave sank innocuous. Again, when He met the furious maniac, the possessing devils had their poor victim so tormented that it was as if brow and locks and eyes writhed with fire, and the gathered passions cried against the approaching Christ, "What have we to do with Thee?" But the word of quiet, heavenly rebuke was spoken, and the maniac next moment was sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed, and in his right mind. It was simple collision with the mercy and the calm of Christ, and the fire and madness that had torn the unhappy soul were gone.

So it was with the Son of Man at every step : the vehemence of every ill was in the earth ; sickness had its prisoners ; sorrow had its broken hearts ; sin its bitter ruin ; death its graves ; it was everywhere a scene of gathered darkness, under which human life cowered, and its hope was lost. But the way of Christ, beneath these shadows, was again as the sapphire floor, as the body of heaven in its clearness. He swallowed up into Himself continually all the sharpness and the fear of earthly ill ; to the cheek of sickness He gave the flush of health ; to the sorrow-laden, the spring of joy ; to the sin-tortured, peace ; to the dead, even in the grave's corruption, life. His was a ministry as it were, a very sea of love, receiving in its crystal depth every instant, but quenching fast as it received, all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And finally, when He closed that ministry upon the Cross, there was the hate of men and devils making darkness round Him ; there was the full tempest of God's wrath making, at the noonday, midnight above Him, so that every light went out, and in the solitariness of His last agony the waves beat in very close on the broken ebbing heart. But in that heart, notwithstanding for one awful minute there did sweep, as it were, the very wing of night, pressing out the cry, " My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me ? " there was, to its last pulse, the serenity of heaven ; and when its quiet prayer was breathed, and *its silver cord* was quietly loosened, there fell on the

crucified Face and Form the calm of death. All the terrors of the wrath of God the air was fraught with *above*, but there was this peaceful shrine of death on the Cross *below*. True, it was a pallid light, as if fading to the brink of being lost ; but it was even there, at its dimmest, an indestructible calm. And then, as the veil of death went off, and the light emerged into resurrection,—and the earthly drapery that yet lingered round the body of the resurrection in its turn went off, and the light burst in the unshaded body of the ascension,—what is realised over and over to the eye gazing on this blessed Lord but that, widening out thus from the pale spot on Calvary in glorious circle, He now fills earth and heaven ? He is the very peace of God : where He stands in His place, sprinkling His own blood upon the mercy-altar before God, and again sprinkling that same blood down on us, there are above the unimaginable splendours of the Godhead ; but between these and us He, in His person, work, human form, love, is the paved sapphire floor and the body of heaven in its clearness. Hence, I think, the meaning in that mystic feature of the apocalyptic vision, when the redeemed in heaven are said to stand on “a sea of glass, mingled with fire,”—it is none other than a setting forth of that Finished Work, which catches and extinguishes within itself the otherwise consuming fire of God we fear ; while, within its own depths, it is a deep translucent sea of peace !

There is no eye, then, need ever waver, but the contrary, as it looks to Christ. You know it is one of the simplest of phenomena that, if a great circle of light be kindled anywhere in the midst of darkness, the darkness, ever as it sweeps upon it, is perpetually changed to light—its cloud breaks and vanishes—its vapour, just touching on the rim of that circle, first takes a ruddy colour, and then fades. So Christ is the light, as the body of heaven, drinking all our darkness perpetually up. Let it be the darkness we fear from God's anger, let it be a vapour born of the earth, only bring it near enough to touch the full light of Christ, and it is dispersed and gone. The drooping eye, emerging into that light, grows clear—the spectral fear that haunted us outside at that shining border shrinks to nothing—the sorrow that rolled over us, carried thither, first is smitten as with hues of gold, then is gradually evaporated like mist, and its very shadow lost—and, above all, the wrath of God abiding on our sins and us, met by the light of Christ, even in *its* blackness, is absorbed as by the noonday. Verily, of this Christ it is true, "Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses." All we cast upon Him—all we hurry with to Him—all that from the depth of our sin, and restlessness, and care, and broken life, and laden hearts we utter to Him—nay, all the condemnation of the holy God that would each hour *destroy us* if it fell,—*all* He receives into Himself. He

has an ear, and a pity, and a help, and a complete salvation for all; and while He takes all miseries that oppress us thus home into Himself, He quenches all, and we find in Him nought but a sea of peace. So St Paul commends his followers in trial to pour thus their sorrows into the depth of Christ, "and the peace of God that passeth understanding would keep their hearts and minds" through Him. So say we to the pilgrim now. Turn aside ever and anon into the mount to gaze on Him "Who is the image of the Invisible God." Gaze on Him till you feel His calm passing into you, and you becoming, if I dare say so, a portion both of Him and it,—till you feel as beyond the reach of any ill to hurt you or destroy you any more—feel as drawn on, and standing with your very feet upon the paved floor, and the body of heaven in its clearness!





CHAPTER XV.

*The Pattern in the Mount.*



In the upper recesses of Sinai Moses dwelt, as in the audience-chamber of God, forty days and forty nights. He was not only supernaturally sustained above bodily want during that time, but, we may be sure, also was supernaturally sharpened and purged both as to eye and ear; for his main task was intently to study and to take off an earthly imprint of that pattern of heavenly things God shewed him there on the mount. We cannot tell how the pattern itself must have appeared as God spread its map before the gaze of Moses. Even in this lower sphere we know that there are glorious things, which pass before us, and which we cannot fasten down into anything but faintest human expression. There is the tablet of illimitable thought, for instance, often rising up luminous within the soul, but under which the poor vehicle of human words staggers and breaks down. Who, even the most endowed of poets, ever struck an outer word-image matching the lambent thought-undulations of the soul? Or while the painter transfers to his canvas pictures of land and sky, beautiful exceedingly, who ever caught to his satisfaction—what fairest touch or colour can

catch—that light ~~as~~ from some dreamland, which ~~is~~ nature's sweetest mystery—which is, in truth, some reflection from the King in His beauty, and the ~~land~~ that is very far off? And if so, we may judge ~~how~~ the pattern in the mount, opening its volume in the hands of God—on its starlit scroll shewing against the dark background the temple, and the altar, ~~and~~ the high priest, and the secret spot of Godhead in the heavens—shewing these mighty things as they were, and are, and ever shall be,—we may judge ~~how~~ such a pattern fell on the sight of Moses, untranslatable in words—untranslatable surely into any earthly copy, ~~How could~~ the heavenly, the boundless, that ~~which~~ was pure light and spirit, be conveyed down into a rude miniature image on earth? Yet God, Who marvellously compresses His glory into a span's breadth, ~~as~~ well ~~as~~ makes it resplendent through the heavens—Who, if you take a microscope and examine, sets forth in the cup and petals and minute painting of the wayside flower, an image as fair and mysterious of His working as in the myriad stars of night—He found expression for the pattern that must have dazzled Moses—He despised not the rude elements of earth, or of the Israelite's desert life, but, in the numberless details wherewith He taught His servant, shewed him how to rear on the sands, in lowly earthly copy, an image of the heavenly and the true. Faint indeed it ~~was~~, and unimposing to the common eye; but to the

pure contemplation of the spiritual eye, instinct with a divine overflow of meaning, so that each pin and woven thread and new border in the tabernacle work became fringed with sacredness ; and, as for the great divisions of the place, they were seen by such contemplation to be advances, one beyond the other—first the outer court, then the holy place, then the holiest of all—opening in their awful line, folding back veil after veil, till, along that avenue of sacrifice, of incense, of light, of the discovery of God Himself upon the mercy-seat, the entranced eye could gaze

“Through golden vista into heaven.”

Accordingly we see, in further Scripture, that that simple desert sanctuary, described by God off His pattern in the mount, and built afterwards by Israelite artisans, was no unfitting shadow from the substance of the sanctuary above. For John, who was admitted in his visions to the precincts of the latter, saw but the earthly—the old Hebrew tent of God—expanded, so to speak, and etherealised in the heavenly structure. Past the outer court or vestibule of heaven, and, as it were, within the first veil, he beheld the Son of Man in priestly garments, and in unbearable splendour, moving about and amongst the seven-branched golden candlestick,—the dark curtain of the chamber round about, as we must conceive it, being such, and the vastness of its height and length and breadth putting such a distance between the spectacle and John, that, to his eye,

it appeared as if the Lord Jesus held up the seven lights like seven stars. Further, the same John, placed in that vision-spot, beheld "a door opened in heaven,"—that is, plainly, the veil of things still deeper moved aside,—and, through that aperture, had sight of what we must call the Holy of Holies—the last interior sanctuary of God,—the throne set in its crystal sea—the Lamb in the midst of the throne—the multitude of white-robed saints—the pure temple round needing no light of sun or moon, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the light thereof. We cannot put in one sentence all these awful glimpses John scatters up and down his pages ; but the mention of but a few is enough to satisfy us, that the outline on which he builds his sublime narrative, the sketch he fills in, illumines and expands into a compass and a colour setting forth the heaven of heavens, is nought but the slight desert tabernacle, struck and again pitched each day by the pilgrim Israelites of old. And what is John's imagery and description but in keeping with the vivid points summed up in the Epistle to the Hebrews,—wherein the Lord Jesus, by the fulness of His work and person, stands forth, Himself the tabernacle, gathering all its compartments and its rites and glorious meaning up in one,—wherein He is revealed dying on the tree,—as it were, the offering poured, in the outer court of earth : then, in His resurrection, ordering the preparation of His Church and kingdom

—as it were, flinging back the first veil, and trimming into light the seven-starred golden candlesticks ; and finally, in His ascension and intercession, passing into the presence of God for us—as it were, the second veil in His own bleeding flesh rent, and, by that new and living way, He entering the High Priest to the very throne, sprinkling His blood upon the mercy-seat, and, because of that, taking up His place there victoriously for ever. Such is the procession in the great steps of Christ, from the cross on Calvary to the throne in heaven ; and as we gaze along the dread march, our Christian thought is but the Israelite tabernacle run out into vast spiritual expanse. We have curtain after curtain thrown back—we follow the bleeding steps from the altar in the outer place—we pass through the holy precincts of the Church beyond—and, deep beyond that, we enter into that which is within the veil—we see all the glory of the mediating Christ, as, thronging from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south, His redeemed cluster on the floor of heaven, and He Himself stands, above all, in light as in a garment, “minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord hath pitched, and not man.”

That, then, is the unfolded reality of the pattern God shewed Moses in the Mount—and the simple desert tent for God’s dwelling was accordingly afterwards upreared. Is it not the true application now, that, as that tent was directed to be raised on the

sands, a shadow from the great archetype in heaven, so each pilgrim in the desert-way yet must needs copy off the same high model, and build a tabernacle of God in the depth of his own soul? I think St Paul means nothing else but this when he says emphatically, "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" and when he makes several other pointed appeals to the sanctity of Christian men, as being, in their bodies and their souls, sanctuaries of the holy God. And, with no small likelihood, it has been suggested, that he catches more than a gleam of meaning from the compartments of the desert tabernacle when he prays God to sanctify His followers wholly, and to "preserve their whole spirit, and soul, and body, blameless, unto the coming of the Lord Jesus." What does that seem but the *body* as the outer court, the *soul* as the second space within the first veil, the *spirit* as the depth of very holiness, and Divine presence within all? Is it not a picture of the pilgrim's being, sacred through its whole structure, from the common vesture of the body to the deep chamber of the spirit, shrine of the blessed God?

True, although most understand that no man can be called to be Christ's, but he is called also to be a temple thus of the awful indwelling God, yet to the high sketch shewn us in the mount, the common life of few corresponds deeply and thoroughly. Who of



us, in body, soul, and spirit, *is* literally the sanctuary of Christ? Some carry the presence of Christ no further or deeper than the outer threshold; it is the court of ordinary religious rites, in which the multitude assemble, in which the knee is bowed, and prayers are said, and there is a certain awe on the mind, and a certain outside knowledge of the truth and will of God. But the deeper being is not moved; the screen of deeper nearness to the God Who is being worshipped is not pierced; yea, so little is involved in this mere worship under an outer church's roof, and in outer postures, that, like the temple court of old, when Jesus entered it at Jerusalem, it may become a scene of buying and selling, and money-changing,—that is, men may and do carry with them into church, when the worship is not deeper than the church form, the busy world tossing and whispering and trafficking round them,—their thoughts thronged with its week-day cares, their ears bent away from God to listen to its solicitations; and may, in this manner, instead of pleasing God, or offering themselves pure habitations of the Spirit, do the very deed for which Jesus scourged the Jews when He cried, "My Father's house is an house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves."

Others, it must be granted, penetrate beyond the outer place; but they are still no deeper than within the first veil. They have accurate knowledge and

conception, if we mean by these a clear grasp of what the Word of God declares as doctrine,—they have a delight in spiritual things,—their emotion breaks forth at spiritual appeal,—and the restraints of God are felt real upon their conscience and their life. But there is, in such, a reserved region still, wherein the triumphs of Christ have never been—a secret lightless region I can compare to nothing so much as to the holiest of all within the temple during the long time before Christ's coming when there was no open vision in Israel; the mercy-seat was cold—the place of God's glory silent and dark. So in the lives I mean, they are even, like Zacharias, ministers at the altar, and irreproachably busy with the work of God; but let the veil upon the inner spot quiver, and unwonted light come, and a voice from between the cherubim speak, as in the case of Zacharias, and their start and fear would declare, like his, how unprepared they are to acquiesce to the last depth in God, how, so far, the passage-way is cleared, but there is that recess beyond they have shut up, dumb and dark.

But there *are* those others, my reader, pilgrims of God in the highest sense, who give up their whole life to be traversed by His feet. As the Israelites stretched out their sanctuary tent, one step in it holier than another, and the last resting-place of all the seat of God's light, so these true followers in the desert path now, make a sanctuary of their life; the gateway of

the body they deem holy from its threshold ; through one stage and screen after another, they then proceed, holiness and awe increasing, till they reach the last secret of the soul, and make the altar there for God holiest of all. They fulfil the glorious reality Jesus sketched in His great prayer, when, looking up to the Father, He said, in reference to His people, " I in them, and Thou in Me ! " They are in microcosm on the earth what the great heavenly world is above ; they are each the temple of the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb. And as an old classic architecture is said to have exhibited the reverent elaborateness of its workmen's art, not only in its pillars and its capitals nobly beautiful, but in the care with which its simplest stones never meant to see the light were cut and set as though they had been precious gems each in its own place—so these lives indwelt in by the Spirit are holy to the last details—there are no shot-holes where one single hour's negligence or sin or worldliness is huddled by, in the thought that it is unknown, and will remain unseen : but pass you, in such lives, from the commonest, poorest matters of the daily existence, on into the solemn temple where the soul enshrines its Lord, or from that temple out again into the daily path, and you find the building of rarest symmetry,—in its little as in its great, in its least hidden stones as on its heart altar, graven the words, " Holiness unto the Lord ! " Who is ready for this traversing through and through

his being of the feet of God; who can bear the minutes of his life, his quietest privacy as his most public profession, to run as grains through the sand-glass of God's light; who can, each day, in *everything*, stand by the awful altar, that he may have his conscience sprinkled with the blood of Christ, "purging it from dead works to serve the living God?" It is a searching, and to some it would be an intolerable test; yet if we bear it not now, how shall we bear it in the great day, when the Lord Whom we seek shall suddenly come into His temple—when He shall come to each, His fan in his His hand, and thoroughly to purge the floor—when He shall go in and out through every court, body, soul, and spirit, and, while gathering up the wheat into the garner, shall burn the chaff in fire unquenchable?

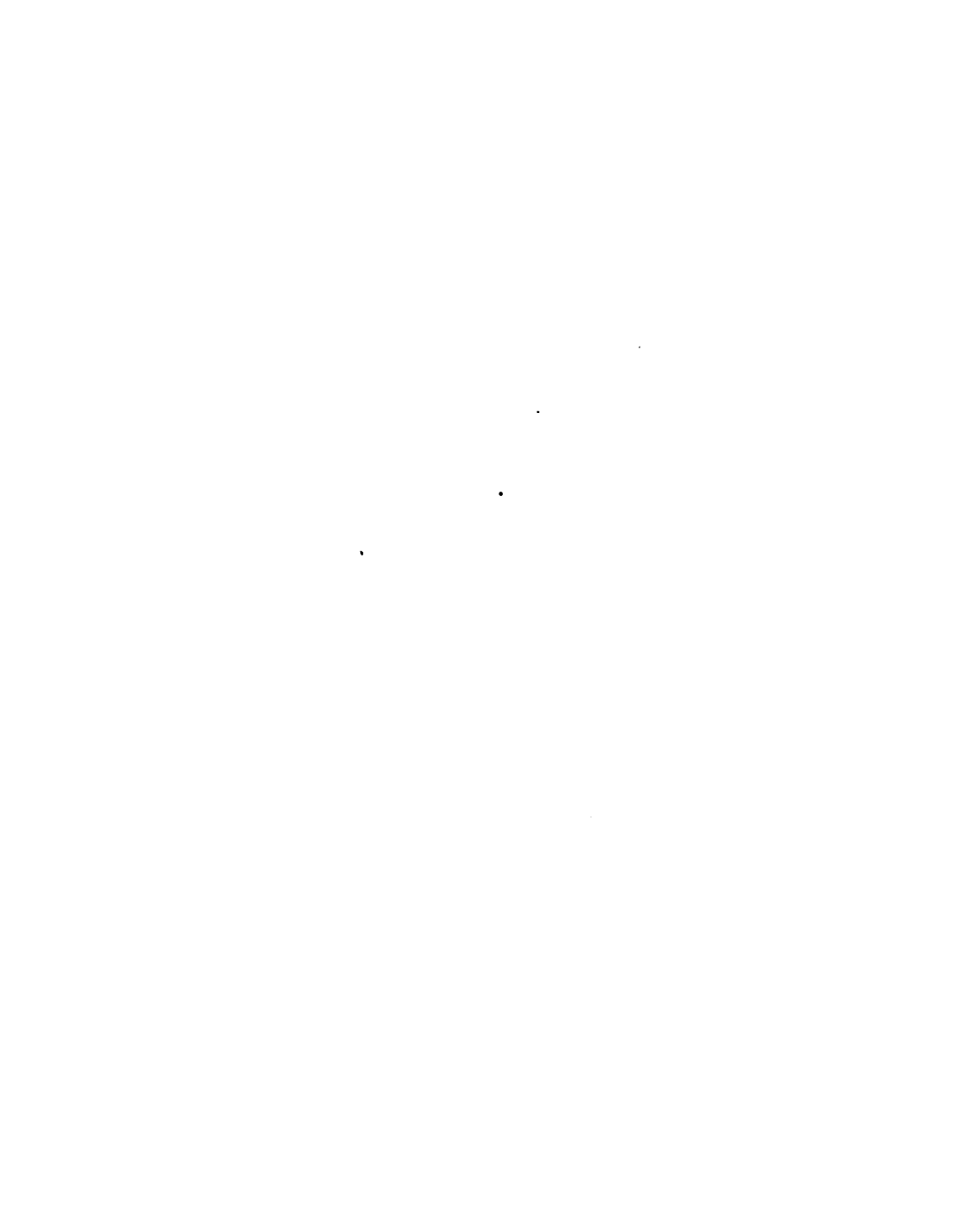
So, thou traveller in the way of God, anticipate in thyself that search of fire. Anticipate even now the dwelling and the light of God. Take impressions off upon thine own soul daily from the pure pattern in the mount. What though the materials at hand for building God's habitation in thyself be few—what though the lot be poor—what though the body frail? The Israelites had no very splendid state round their wilderness tent; it was a building wrought from their best, certainly, but it was a building simple and even rude as their own wayfaring life. So thy shelter for *the* living Jesus may be lowly—thy life torn by the

strain of trial—thy offering such as the poor widow made, two mites, all she had,—yet, beneath the darkest and poorest garment on the outer lot, there may be truly translated the temple of the high and holy God. His palace ere now has been in the poor man's hovel,—His sweetest dwelling in the broken heart. And when thou art wasted to the very grave, when the earthly curtain outside, of pain or age or sickness, is rending off, is it not glorious reality and triumph for thee, that, through the very chinks and rents waste has made, the indwelling light is breaking forth,—thou art about to cast the mantle of the earthly, and to appear in the white and glistening dress of the heavenly—thou knowest “that, when the earthly house of this tabernacle is dissolved, thou hast a building of God—an house not made with hands—eternal in the heavens!”



CHAPTER XVI.

**The Molten Calf.**





WE turn the next leaf of these scenes on and around Sinai, and we find a page of deepest shame for Israel. It is a dark and downward step from the high shrine of the mount where Moses saw the pattern of upper things unrolled on its sheet by the hand of God ; where he received also from God the stone tables of the law, finger-graven with their letters of light, and where for forty days and forty nights he heard the divine expounding of the tabernacle worship he was to teach Israel ; it is, I say, a mournful downward step, from that pure retreat to the glare of guilty common daylight in the plain. Yet such is the rapid change of scene.

The lengthened absence of their leader in the mount, it is said, had worn the expectation of the Israelites out. The late scenes of their first gathering about Sinai, too, had faded in their impression ; and though the mount still burned with smoke and fire, no other incident had taken place. The long interval since Moses had disappeared was dumb. The inert and bondage-stricken nature of the people, therefore, receded quickly from the spiritual stimulus it had received, back to the level of

its own natural grossness, like some sluggish wave, running in and driven high upon the beach, but, without any hold to keep it fixed at high mark, lapsing back again into the sullen sea ; so Moses, as their hold between them and God, being gone, they dropped back into the old base life. In that temper they crowded round Aaron, urging that he should make some material thing in lieu of Moses,—gods, as they said, to go before them. Aaron had already taken the edge off his conscience by descending from the post at which his brother had left him some way up the hill, with the ring of elders in a solemn assessorship round him. He had broken from that high stand above the people ; and now, like all whose moral courage and opportunity are maimed by the conscience of some guilty tale within, he dared not protest against the popular cry. All he could do, when he had got the eager offerings of gold ornaments from the women, and when he had graven and wrought from these the image of a molten calf, was to delude himself and them by the poor sleight-of-hand pretence that this was no god in opposition to, or in place of, the great and living God above, but was His emblem, so to say, through their homage done to which they were, in effect, magnifying and calling Him to mind. So, setting forth this monstrous idea in the base molten image, (a fact of which, I think, the narrative leaves no doubt,) a feast was made, a scene of wild revelry was begun, and the burden of the popular ex-

citement was, "This be thy god, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt."

Meantime, upon that frenzied shame below there was set the glance of the all-holy Eye from the mount above. The converse of God with Moses was abruptly broken ; and the latter listened with dismay, we may be sure, to God's wrathful account of what was passing in the plain. Contrast indeed ! that at the very moment while, for this people's worship, the pattern of the deep things of God was being shadowed forth into an earthly design and given in the Sinai cloud, just underneath the skirt of that cloud, the people, so God-sheltered, were playing in the freaks of miserable idolatry ! It was a moment big with peril, for the anger of the Lord burned in sentence after sentence against them ; and but that Moses, bold and utterly self-forgetful in his mediation, had stood pleading and holding back judgment in the breach, the tale of wilderness journeys would at this point have been done. As it was, having wrested, as it were, God's pledge of mercy, he turned in strong concern and hastened down. Joshua met him as he went ; and, for a time, involved in the deep craggy slopes, they could not see the camp in the valley, although, through the strange mountain silence, echo brought the noise of the idol-feast. Joshua, with the single instinct of a soldier, imagined it in a moment to be the clash of war or the sound of victory ; but Moses, better informed, told him it was none of these, but the

rise and fall of unholy song. At that moment, turning the sudden shoulder of the hill-slope, and coming out in full view beneath the cliff—there stood the two figures from the mount; and there, in the valley, full before them, stretched the now startled scene. It was all plain at a glance—the tale of shame and falseness and abomination; and, while still there, side by side with Joshua, and in their hasty apparition clad as with awful majesty, Moses, in his bitterness of heart, as if all that had been done for this people were now undone, took the two glittering tables of the law he held, and, before all the people, dashed them to pieces beneath the hill. Then followed his rapid step into the very heart of the idol crowd,—his taking the molten calf and breaking it and grinding it to dust and scattering the dust upon the brook that had hitherto fed the people with its sweet stream, flowing from out the mount of God. Relentings he had none. The once pure water, now polluted by their own sin, he made the idolaters drink. He upbraided Aaron with his monstrous guilt; and, scarce waiting for his feeble, pitiable reply, he stood in the camp gate, he drew out the volunteer band of Levi as on the Lord's side, and, sending them up and down among the tents, bid them slay unsparingly the enemies of the Holy One of Israel. It was a swift and bloody hour; and sad it must have been to the heart of Moses to look on the smitten corpses, to hear the wail in the dwellings of Israel, and to bethink him of

the first heap of graves they were to leave in the desert ; but he wore an austere eye till all was done,—till he bid the people wait now, in the ruin and silence of the spot, his speech with God for them,—till he ascended again to the holy Presence in the mount ; and there it was, as he turned to heaven, the noble tenderness of the man gushed out at last, and he cried to God that, though he himself should be blotted from His book, this unhappy people should be forgiven their great sin, and should live and not die. So, at his prayer, the wrath hanging over Israel was turned away.

I shall not dwell on the blended greatness and gentleness recorded thus of Moses in the chapter of the molten calf—neither on the patience literally of exhaustlessness with which God waited, that, from its lowest falls, He might incite the miserable Israelite life to some spiritual rising again. The point is rather, the incredible fatality of that idol-worship at the very feet of Jehovah. Was it possible ? The overhanging mount with its dark vestment and its living fires declaring God—the recent scenes fertile with holy signs—the covenant of blood between Him and them—the sight the elders had gotten of Him in the cloud—and, that very hour, Moses their mediator face to face with Him in their behalf,—was it possible that, in this awful compass of God's nearness, grace, glory, the camp of Israel should yet become a scene of idol-worship and festivity ? We speak and think of such

an outrage, and such a fall as that, as monstrous. And yet, my reader, is it not worse than paralleled amongst us? *We* see not the glaring features of the contrast as these were seen in material pictures at the foot of Sinai,—the rites of guilty recklessness round the molten calf here; the great God looking from the cloud-covered precipice yonder. But the contrast, though more veiled amongst us, is not less true and dark. For count we up all the nearnesses and dealings of our God with us—the overshadowing Cross of His Son, to which we have professed to turn—the enveloping and brooding of His Spirit, not on our daily way only, but on our very souls—the mount of prayer—the scene of Sabbath ordinance—the spot of holy sacrament we frequent—the shinings of God's hand and face on us, alike in the tender rejoicings and the heart-searching sorrows of life—count we up all the realities that press in upon us grander and more soul-subduing than ever Sinai did on Israel; and then turn we to our Christian life,—what in such stupendous Presence do we find much of it to be? Even when we are fresh from some solemn life-scene, or are moved yet by some spiritual exercise in which we have caught a heart-impress from God, and His world has broken on us far and high in its light, is it not so that but a short day or two are gone, and rapidly the impression fades out, and the rich colour of the things of heaven round us melts in common air? Does not God's dread spiritual world

thus fall back from sight? We give it a short nominal lease of influence over us every seventh day or so; but turn the next leaf, on stepping from the atmosphere of God's dwelling—what is it next but the picture of this lower world? And how, with its gods many and its lords many, that world's arena is peopled—how busy and manifold its worshippers,—some, of the golden god of money—others, of their own selfishness in hundred shapes—others, of base passion, of pleasure, of godless mind, of the whole racy varied run of a mere earthly life,—know we not but too well? Verily, what an utterance would come from, let us say, a seething city, if its life-currents all had tongues to tell the tale, and we the hearing of the holy God to hear—what a flow of voices even from the busy hearts couched in the quiet church and in the still service of God, if those hearts would but break their silence—what a multitudinous cry of their idolatries would reach us—"These be thy gods, O Israel!" Let us not, therefore, think we are so many removes off, if any, from the Israelitish sin. Often, looking at the sharp contrast in Christian life, one is forced to think of that fearful touch in Scripture, which in one or two lines tells us that under the bleeding feet of Christ, as He hung on the tree, the rough soldiers cast lots for His garments—blind to the awful Form above them, and to that being the meeting spot at that moment of things unspeakable from heaven, earth, hell, they rattled their dice

lightly beneath the Cross! So the vanity, the world-worship, the sin mockeries, the greedy gain, in which Christian men take share—is it not all like *a game again played beneath the Cross?* We cannot, I repeat, boast above the Israelites. In flinging discredit on them, we condemn ourselves; for, inasmuch as we stand amazed at the nature in them that, touched by God at so many points in its higher side, and drawn heavenward, yet, on its other side, gravitated so continually downwards, as that its very soul clave to the dust—we must have deeper amazement still at the spectacle of that nature in ourselves which on its spiritual side embraced, if I may say so, by the very immanence and love of Heaven, yet, in so many instances, on its other side, is “earthly, sensual, devilish!”

But this does not exhaust the lesson of the molten calf. We have said that the narrative implies the Israelites set up their idol, not as a false god in opposition to the living and true God, but, on the contrary, rather as that image of their own, through which, in visible shape, they sought to set the living and true God forth. It was an outward copy of their inward thought of God: and that inward thought took such an outward shape because it had birth in the low slave associations of their old life, and in their random memories of the animal-shapen gods of Egypt; so that, such as was the gross darkened mind of Israel, such was their idol god wrought of their gold ornaments



and fused in their fire. It was the best they could frame. It was their hideous conception, when left to themselves, set forth materially, of Him Who dwelt above them inaccessibly in light, and Who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt. So, in long after-times, Paul wrote of the darkened mind in the world in his day that had given birth to ideas of the living God like itself—that had “changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things.” And so, in this Christian time, it is not that men literally oppose God, that the things worshipped and clung to in the world are the declared enemies of God; on the contrary, it is the *same* lives that are busy in the world’s theatre on week-days, and that turn in to the quiet of God’s house on Sundays. But then the world’s pursuits and whole influence so mould these lives after their kind,—the earth so makes earthy—sin so makes base—vanity so makes hollow,—that where men coming from the world do their worship before God, each mind, according to its habit, gives birth to its own self-coloured image of His being and His light, and, instead of true honour done Him at His altar, it is, alas, often no better than the molten calf of Israel over again—calling by the name of the holy God that which is dishonour and a lie. Just as, if the eye look through a discoloured medium, it sees the pure light broken into many blurred hues—it

has the fairness of landscape, mountain, sky, destroyed, and, in place of these, fantastic shapes, that make a false and repulsive world : so the mind, discoloured by its own earthly life, and looking up through that medium to the High and Holy One, sees an image that, compared with Him, is untrue as night representing day. Hence, in a thousand hearts met in Christian worship, there may be as many strange shadows misnamed God, —the hard thought of the unholy—the dream of the luxurious and sentimental—the undefined cloud passing before the hard and austere—the terror of the superstitious—the cold conception of the cold, clear head. What are these, and many more, but travesties of God? what, but the material of each mind, molten in the fire, so to speak, of its own unpurged heart? And what can be the result, but that worshippers of such a sort, approaching to the altar, instead of drinking there of the pure river of water of life, find that they are filled with the fruit of their own devices ; that the true and righteous God, scattering the dust of their own idols, so to say, on the stream of grace, gives it them to drink—their spiritual exercise neither sanctifies nor refreshes them—they receive only of what they bring—and the current, brimming to others with the life of heaven, to them is polluted at its source.

When we think of these things, my reader, what a watch, as Christ's pilgrims, need we to set on our own heart ! Such is the evil in the best, that in a moment

we are off the high balance of a near intercourse with God. Some vapour from the earth rises, its shadow passes between Him and us, and, in the mechanicalness or in the wandering or in the creeping habit unguarded sin is weaving on us, we are forthwith no longer true worshippers, but bowing down really to some base fiction we have substituted, and saying, "*This* be thy god, O Israel!" Hence how grieved the Spirit often is in His striving with us; how awful the light of God's eye set piercingly upon us; and how, but for the interposing prayer of Christ in the mount, Him who pleads for us with a sadness yet at the same time with a love that can never die, we should over and over perish in our falseness and our sin. I say, therefore, that if we are to escape the guilt of the molten calf we must be rigorously watchful of our hearts. We must leave frequently the deadening air of the plain, and stand in the pure, elastic air of the mount. We must, in a word, bathe the soul, immediately and always, in the very light of God. That light—the light of God's Word, the light of all exercise and ordinance and faith and life that bring Christ in His presence near, the light above all, of constant intercourse with God—as the Scriptures call it, "praying in the Spirit," praying as if we lived and moved already wrapped in the luminousness of the upper world—that light of God is the one powerful solvent that in a moment disengages all impurity from out the

heart. As the chemist does with his solvents when he wishes foreign matters detached and deposited, and some pure element to be set free ; so the light of God I speak of, taking in the heart often as you carry it there, sheds every grain of pollution and of evil out of it—by its action drops these down as dregs, and lifts the freed soul then up in purity and beauty like itself. Hasten, then, always into that presence of light and power. Sink not down among the world's shadows, out of which, if the best part of your life is there, your worship can but catch feeble and broken glimmers : but, like the upshot arrow, take flight to God : in His light behold light : and there, being strengthened in your gaze as you gaze deeper, there, being purified and transformed in your life as you live more constantly, that shall come to pass which is put with the likeness of a holy riddle in the lines :—

“ Jesus in heaven, Jesus in the heart,  
Heaven in the heart, the heart in heaven.”

CHAPTER XVII.

Within the Cliff.



THE chapter of the molten calf done, Moses made one very remarkable request of God. It was that God would shew him His glory. Had not Moses been perusing the features of that glory all along and from day to day,—in the burning bush—in the miracles in Egypt—in the pillared cloud and fire—in the descent of God on Sinai—in the sight of the similitude of God he had shared with Aaron and the elders—and, above all, in the secret audiences he had had on Sinai, when God spoke with him face to face as a man speaketh with his friend? Was he not perfectly familiar in the companionship and light and knowledge of God: What, then, meant he by the earnest prayer, that God would shew him His glory? He was just fresh from an interview in the tabernacle in the plain, when all Israel had stood each man in his tent-door, and had looked after Moses tremblingly as he went behind the curtain of the Most High—he had just ceased a close speech with God, in which he had gained promise of the Angel-guide not yet to abandon the guilty people; was it not therefore something like superfluous reiteration, that, when all was done, a sudden vehement as-

piring seems like a flame to have burst through the soul and lips of Moses, and he prayed to God, "I beseech thee, shew me Thy glory!"

Yet you will understand the case better when you reflect on what has often happened in an earthly friendship. Two lives have been as one in the walk and intimacy of years; you know your friend, as you suppose, thoroughly; one heart reflects the other, one mind shares the whole life and opinion of the other; yet, close and dear as is this bond, there comes a moment when some chord of hid emotion is of a sudden touched,—some flash of thought in a suggestive book you read together wakens it, or some tale of half voiceless sorrow, or one of you is in pain or danger or in the rush of bitter trial,—and straightway the smooth surface of your common walk together breaks up; soul is revealed to soul; and as you gaze in each other's eyes, you feel that what you knew of your friend formerly was only darkly as through a glass—that now you know as also altogether you are known. Somewhat in this way we may suppose Abraham to have had sight of God on the eve of Sodom's ruin, for although in ordinary times he was the friend of God and walked with Him, in that agitated hour there must have been such a gush of intense words and earnestness between them that God shone round on His servant with a double glow, and the latter, smitten even while he prayed, fell on his face and called himself dust and



ashes. Somewhat in this way also we may think of **Elijah**, who was familiar with the deliverances and love of God, yet at the cave's mouth, in the day of his uttermost grief, the Lord passed by touching him in such wise to the quick that the prophet covered his face with his mantle and stood speechless. Somewhat in this way also we may think of the three disciples on the height of Transfiguration; they were the companions of their Lord by the flood and in the field, so that they knew His holy features and feared not, but were gladdened in His presence; but in that withdrawn scene under the cloud, He broke aside the screen of His glory, so that as the half-repressed splendour poured its flood upon them, they fell to the earth as dead men. And somewhat in this way, finally, we judge it was with Moses when he besought God to see His glory; he had read that glory page after page, till one would have thought he might have repeated it from end to end in amplest tale; but for all the closeness and the dearness of his walk with God, there was still some yearning deep in the soul unfulfilled—some chapter yet that left the tale unfinished—some spring beyond all those other springs he had drunk in God still untouched, whose stream he would loosen, whose gush he would drink. "I beseech Thee," was his craving, therefore, "shew me Thy glory!"

God complied with the request. Not that it was possible for Moses, or for any man, to see the essential

being and glory of the Most High, and live. At best, it could be but the skirts of that glory, or the foot-tracks where its steps had been. Thus far Moses was privileged—up to the very margin where human eye dared look, but beyond which it would be over-dazzled, and perish. So God bid him stand within a clift of rock on a solitary spot of Sinai; the hills round about were to be bare of men and cattle; the silence was to be as the silence and sacredness of heaven; and there, Moses, having placed himself, lapped over by the walled crags, the morning soft above him, and the hand of God his shelter, he looked through the lattice of the hiding-place thus strangely made, and the Lord God passed before him, and proclaimed His name:—“The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.” It was not that, probably, which Moses had had expectation of; it was a disclosure of the deep lore of God’s name poured upon his ear, not a spectacle flaming on the eye; indeed, we may at once infer that, while the ear might so far hear, the eye was incapable of bearing the burst of the Invisible,—that, as the wave of God passed rustlingly on the hill-side, the window through which

Moses strained his gaze forward was darkened by the merciful cloud above him dropping its drapery between, —and that only when the wave was vanishing, the veil before his eyes melted, and he saw the latter part, like the sweep of a garment train, gleaming on him, and then gone. Yet even that was enough, as we shall see, to fling back on the face of Moses such a radiance as, when he descended to the camp, beholders could not look on it steadily, till through a veil its light was tempered.

Such, then, was the opening into God's glory Moses saw from within the clift. Now, the point I think most manifest in this challenging of what many would consider a more perilous intercourse with God, is the high spiritual heroism of the man. Might he not have rested in content with what he had seen and heard already—with the ties already very close that knit him to the God of Israel—with the holy balance on which all his daily way and speech with Heaven were at that moment poised? Why disturb the existing state of things? Why put his present privilege and quiet into uncalled-for hazard, by pressing forward as he did in that burning prayer into further depths of awfulness, and, it might be, fear? We can only answer, that he but obeyed the law of spiritual boldness and intensity every true servant of the living God necessarily comes under. He could not have paused, even though he *would* have done so; for he was in the

strong current of the will and work of Heaven ; and such was the fascination in his dedicated life—such the one step of ardent laying hold of God leading to another step higher and more ardent yet—that there was no line where he could arrest his way—he *must* know where to find God, and, if that were possible, come even to His seat ; like Paul in after-times, who illustrated the very same passionate aspiring, it might be said of Moses, that, “ forgetting those things which were behind, and reaching forth to those things which were before, he pressed toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” Hence the courage—not the mere frivolous curiosity, which God would have rebuked—but the rapt courage and deliberateness with which he placed himself within the clift, and, in its wild companionless spot, waited that, according to his own prayer, he might see Jehovah’s glory.

Are we aware that the same startling law, forcing on Moses thus from one stage of acquaintanceship to another with the Most High God, is that very law which now, in our Christian dedication, necessarily abides on us ? It may be, indeed, that we are not so earnestly bent on Divine discovery as he was—that we do not speak and cry to God out of such passion of spiritual desire as moved him. We may willingly be ready to keep things around us in our lot and life exactly as they are,—the quiet everyday blessing—the

coming and going to the house of God—the routine of prayers—and the uneventful way in which we move from day to day, retreating none, neither advancing—only a state of life smooth and still, and in which we glide on unalarmed and our souls in quiet. We should be thankful, I doubt not, that this framework about us were always so ; we should crave no deeper dealings with our God ; we should feel, if tested on the point, that we had advanced near enough to the kingdom of heaven—that the ties that bind us to it in our Christian name and way at present, are enough, and their stretch brings us near enough ; if we were drawn nearer to its light and flame, we should shrink, retreating, and afraid. That, I believe, is the prevalent habit of our mind.

Yet, although this may be our real heart-temper on the subject, we cannot help ourselves out of the dread dilemma in which by our Christian pledges we are fixed. For what is the meaning of those many prayers that day by day pass, it may be lightly, but before God, across our lips ? We dare not, in these prayers, ask that God would keep us, as regards the knowledge of Himself, exactly as we are—that He may not put anything we love on earth to hazard, in drawing us on to a deeper realising in our souls of His light and life,—in a word, that He may not isolate us awfully within the clift, as He did Moses, and there shew us His glory. We cannot pray such literal things as

these, although, if truly interpreted, perhaps these would be the real petitions found at the bottom of our souls. Our prayers, therefore, of necessity, are—that we may know God—that we may increase in the experience of His kingdom—that we may rise from one reach of grace to another. These are the requests Christian life forces on us, and without which Christian life would mean nothing but a hollow mockery. And what then, I ask, must such prayers,—such prayers as we are all in the habit of breathing, alone, or in our families, or at the public altar,—what do such prayers virtually mean, but that God would, at whatever cost, lead us on and up—that He would put us to peril—that He would disturb and dash, if no otherwise it can be, the pleasant surroundings of our life—that He would isolate us into loneliness, and put us within the clift, and there, in secluded shadow, shew us His glory? No man who prays much, and prays the awful utterances the Christian tongue must utter, but deliberately handles these weapons. He is like the sailor in the quiet port, desiring he may know the strength and safety of his anchor cable; he can only discover that by being launched in the roaring storm, when, paying his cable out, he shall find whether, strained between life and death, its ligaments will hold. Or he is like the soldier in his quiet home, desiring he may know the temper of his shield; that can only be by his dashing into the thick of battle,

and receiving the winged shafts upon its face. Or he is like the pilgrim under the palm-tree shade, desiring he may know that his bread always shall be given him, and his water sure ; he can only put that to trial by plunging again into the waste, looking for his manna on the bare sands, and for his stream flowing from the rock. So, have you considered what many of your prayers must mean ? that answer only can come to them sometimes at a cost that makes the heart tremble—that destroys earthly peace—that makes past life crumble down around us like the crumbling of a vision ? Have you considered that is often what is meant by your “ following on to know the Lord ”—the storm, to try your anchor—the battle, to prove your shield—the desert way, to find the sufficiency of pilgrim fare ?

Hence, I believe God’s placing us within the clift to see His glory. He does so in answer to our own asking, however little we may have weighed the terms of that asking, and however much, in breathing them, we may, at heart, have been untrue. One is drawn aside into the clift of personal loneliness ; our expectations from the world fail ; its friendships drop off ; its rewards, when we grasp them, mock us as the thin air ; we have a shadow on us of the heart-desertion of our Lord when He said to His disciples, “ Ye shall be scattered every man to his own, and shall leave Me alone.” Yet, out of the window of that solitude we see with a kindling eye then a nearness that had not come so near

before, and we borrow the Lord's words again when He added, "Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with Me!" Another is thrust into the clift of bereavement. The desire of his eyes is removed at a stroke; the fairness and the charm of his home are blotted out. But again, from between the cold rocks, he sees another leaf turned over in the Book of God and reads these letters, dead before, living now—" *Thou* art the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever!" Another is withdrawn into the clift of infirmity and pain. He is like one who has sailed hitherto on a full and buoyant sea, but he would know more of God, and he is summoned, therefore, to leave the busy deck of life, to land alone upon the shore, and then, getting him as unto the imprisonment of iron rocks, to lie still on his bed like an abandoned waif, while the great life-current outside flows past, and the company in which he had an energetic part is borne from him on its way and is gone. It is a bitter solitude and helplessness; yet, through the lattice of his pain, presently again so blessed is the breaking in upon him of the Saviour-God, that, in the tenderness and joy of that countenance he seems as if he never knew before, he cries, in the sublime content of Paul when, helpless in *his* prison, "As always, so *now* also, Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life or by death!" Another, once more, is shut into the clift of death; for to some Christ will not appear in the daylight of life. His form perpetually fades there,



and it needs the over-shadowing of the grave, that, in His vividness and glorious beauty, He may appear; so some, who pray to know God, must die for that knowledge' sake; they must leave all, and break all ties, and withdraw into the dark rest; but then *there*, there breaks on them in Christ the near blessedness of heaven, and they sink, like Paul, again, saying, "To die is gain!"

Is it not the case then, my reader, that, as heavenward pilgrims, we should realise with fear the law that binds us? We are in the current, and cannot bid the river stand still. We have put our hand to the plough, and cannot look back. Our whole life and prayers, if they have one ring of truth in them, "cry out for God, even the living God—when shall we come and appear before God?" And if, in reply, God selects for us the shattered rock, and in its clift, as in a lone watching spot, constrains us by His hand that, while He in His glory passes by, we may see—we must remember it is *we* who have challenged Him to the venture—that, if the pathway of the Cross is to be followed, we cannot avoid such crises, and that, only from a spot so hemmed in, darkness round us, isolation in the very heart,—only from within the clift can we, as at a condensing focus-point, see, most intensely, the living God. Oh, the difference between our former knowledge and this deeper shewing us, even at great cost, of Christ's glory! Would any one lose it who, even at the great cost, has

gained it? The preacher talked of Christ before, but, coming from between the clift, his phrases burn now. The wayfarer read the guiding verses of his Bible reverently before, but, coming from between the clift, he finds they speak to him direct from Heaven now. The worshipper prayed in still mood before, but, coming from between the clift, his prayers are lit with the very thrill of the Spirit now. Life, that was before dull and gray, teams with the comings and the goings of the blessed Feet now. The Lord Jesus "stands behind our wall," "He looks forth upon us through our lattice." We detect Him "in the clefts of the rocks," and "in the secret places of the stars." We see perpetually "the countenance that is comely;" we hear "the voice that is sweet." Shall we not, then, again and again, pray the high prayer of Moses—"We beseech Thee, shew us Thy glory?" He may put us in the wild and narrow clift; but much as flesh and blood may fear, neither the place, nor the spectacle we are to look on, need ever shake us at heart, for in Christ Jesus we have the sure shelter and the sure promises of God for ever.

"Sprinkled with His atoning blood  
Safely before our God we stand,  
As on the rock the prophet stood  
Beneath His shadowing hand."

CHAPTER XVIII.

*The Veiled Face.*

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WHEN Moses reached the plain again, the signet fire of God burned in his face. He had caught its impress first from within the clift, when, as we may suppose, after listening to the name and the passing by of that glorious One he sought, his ardour grew unrestrainable, and, thrusting aside, if I may say so, the screen of cloud, he plunged his gaze forward into the wave of retreating light. In that moment, the baptism of God's exceeding fairness had been left upon him. But he had further been a second forty days and forty nights in rapt conference with God ; and, in that space, the upraised brow had caught clearer yet the heavenly seal. When, therefore, he appeared coming down the slope of Sinai, this divine nimbus rested on him. He himself wist not of it ; but Aaron and the people shrank from his presence with fear. They could not abide on their common sight even this fragment glow of the Invisible. So, while Moses stood amongst them, wonderingly, no doubt, and shewed them the two new stone tables of the law in his hands, and rehearsed to them all God had spoken, he was obliged to put a veil upon his face, to shade and all but to hide the unearthliness

of that light he had unconsciously drawn after him out of the realms of God. He moved about and talked amongst the people, veiled — when he turned in to meet the Most High in His tabernacle he took the veil off, for there light but met and bathed itself anew in light ; but always again when he came forth into the camp, he dropped the shade on his brow, so that the poorest Israelite might look on him and fear him not.

We all can conceive how this radiant burning on the face of Moses came about. Even in ordinary occurrence we are taught how it must have been so. We see how, in animated conversation, light kindled by the glow of mind on one face communicates itself to another. Or in the companionship of such love as that between parent and child, how the smile of penetrative tenderness in the one sheds its beauty on the half-worshipping eyes and uplifted brow of the other. Or how, in a great assemblage, when the preacher mounts in the passion of his theme, the audience borrows from his deep-stirred fire, and the mass of hitherto calm faces ranged before him of a sudden ripples, rank over rank, with light. Or, in the more solemn experience of men, when, as with Stephen, the spirit is about to part into the dark elements, how death has been rebuked even at the last moment by a grander mastery, the dying gaze has fastened on the heaven open, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, and the face has shone as it were the face of an angel ! How easy, then,

to judge that Moses, admitted for so long to the very fount of God, moved so long by the very speech and by the very thrill of God, should have come down from Sinai, as he did, fraught with the flush of heaven. The soul first had glowed through its depths in response to God, and from the soul the quick flame had streamed into the face.

So it should not have been unexpected on the Israelites' part that their leader should have borne down with him that glory from the unseen. Yet the atmosphere of earth was too thick upon them, and their eyes too feeble because of that, to bear the test, so that they could not steadfastly behold it; wherefore Moses, to the people's loss undoubtedly, yet wisely and with considerateness, screened himself behind his veil. Had he persisted in carrying about through the camp the naked dazzling of his presence, he would not only have dismayed and repelled the people, but in the end he would have brought scorn on the seal of God through his very vanity; but he threw the wise and tempering veil over all, and, through that, while he drew the people, he preserved God's marvel wrought on him still sacred in their deepest fear.

Can we not feel, my reader, and applaud the rare self-denying wisdom of Moses' way? Perhaps, had we stood by his side, we should have been eager that he would have stripped the veil, at all cost, aside, on the plea, that God's gift, so signal, should not be concealed,

but brought to open day ; just as, in the impatience, and, we may add, the imprudence of our own first impulse now, if men have bestowed on them special grace from heaven, we deem it to be the next necessity that they thrust its tale vehemently upon the world. We cannot think there is any measure to be kept in bearing such a testimony—the grace itself is so exceeding precious, and the world round us so needful of its light ; and, accordingly, there have been those in all periods of the Church who have held it sacred duty to unveil the profoundest experiences and emotions of the soul, and to set these broad before the outer and profane gaze—it is to be feared, at heavy cost. For what do we find as to the understanding, in the world, of the spiritual kingdom of our God ? Paul declared long ago that the natural man—that is, he who is, in his darkness, without any point of capacity or kindling between him and the light of God—*cannot*, in the nature of the case, discern it ; to the Jews it was a stumbling-block ; to the Greeks foolishness. And again and again it has been demonstrated, that the light of that kingdom is too strong in its naked power for the ordinary vision. We feel it instinctively when, letting off restraint from the welling of our own soul, we sometimes are betrayed into pouring spiritual confidence into ears that do not understand us, and revealing heart-thoughts to eyes that look only to be amazed, or by their cold unconcern to make us shrink ;



and we feel it instinctively when, in the society of our time, if we but openly word something bearing on the kingdom of a present Lord—if we turn aside the conversation that startling way—if we but lift a corner of the veil—men withdraw from us as though they had seen a spectre. It is laying bare too much at once. It is letting in light so suddenly and so sharply, that it strikes on the unaccustomed eyeballs with pain ; as we have it related of a poor captive, when released from a dungeon in which he had lain many years, and in whose black night he had lost the memory of upper day,—brought up suddenly into the glare of noon, his eyeballs meeting it were so struck with anguish, that, hiding them, and fleeing back to his prison, he cried that he might be buried in its depths again. So most untaught minds in the world cannot meet the outburst of God ; they are offended by, and they fear, its presence. And if you are to win your way as Moses did through the camp of Israel, you will not rend the shade aside, but rather temper it the more, if need be, even holding back the light of God, and putting a veil upon its face.

We cannot, therefore, I think, but confirm what Moses did as the wiser part. Our Lord walked in the selfsame way. From His cradle in Bethlehem, to His grave in the garden,—nay, to His rising in the cloud of ascension into heaven,—His life was a veiled, and, as it were, a suppressed life. The very fulness of the

Godhead dwelt in Him bodily; but it was only now and then, at chinks and rents in the curtain, the glory streamed out. Even to His near disciples, He was chary of disclosing more than glimpses,—as on the Mount of Transfiguration, when the veil for a minute melted, and the flame shot forth,—or as in His resurrection days, when sudden intimations from Him, as it were touches from behind the veil, made their hearts burn within them. His life, I repeat, was a life, not of dazzling wonderment, as it might well enough have been, but of deep-shaded, well-nigh hidden light. And who does not know how such holy wisdom was justified in its results—how that life stole in upon the world—how the handful of leaven wrought silently for the leavening of the whole lump—how the little seed took root, and silently came up and rose into the tree that shall yet be the covert of the whole earth? In like manner, after Christ's holy way, all who have come doing His work, find their gain in tempering in themselves the fire of heaven—in letting their light shine, it is true, according to His command, but “*so shine*” as that it may fall on the gaze of men unstartling and unrepellent,—in measure as men can bear, subdued to the weak, stronger in its brilliance to the strong,—but never, I suppose, except when a man turns in his privacy to converse with God—never with the veil wholly taken away. Will not the teacher or the parent, for example, find that the work of moulding and drawing to himself the

young minds about him, is done, out of all question, best, when he studies less the direct bearing in upon them of sharp precept, and intense exhortation, and repeated insisting on rule and right,—when rather he puts aside the manner of directness, veils the strong light, and lets his own silent unconscious life speak for him, his own example tell, the slipping out of a ray of feeling here, and a thrill of influence there, send home lessons whole discourses could not teach? The manner of incessant rule and precept not seldom spoils his whole end, by its being, to the young heart, light too much and intolerable; whereas the life-influence, indirectly shed, is that very enchantment through which young hearts most are won. And will not the preacher find that, while he is eloquent and earnest in his pulpit speech—unwearied in his labours and his teachings in and out amongst his flock—there is a far deeper force which constrains them most, and without which his high ends are always more or less lost, and that is—the silent power breathed from the veiled yet felt beauty of his life? His strong appeals from the pulpit may burn, and perhaps for the time arouse; but this, the holiness, the gentleness, the loveliness that are shed from him in his home, and that cannot choose but gleam out in quiet touches wheresoever he is found;—*this* it is that steals into the universal heart. And so with any effort for our blessed Lord amongst men. The strong outburst of speech and deed is undoubtedly

of value, and it is what we stake our faith and hopes on most, because it is a demonstration palpable to sense; but it is far transcended, if we but knew it, by that charm in a good man's life, which, as a veiled light, wins unconsciously upon us, till we by and by realise it, and exclaim, "God was in this thing, and I knew it not!"

And yet one would think no principle is surer and plainer than that of the high efficacy of veiled or suppressed power. Nature illumines this principle in all her borders; it is not by the hurricane sweep baring her majestic strength that her deepest or most permanent effects are wrought, but by the veiled footfalls of the dew, by the silent sunshine, by the hundred touches men know not of, nature quickens all her growth, and covers all the earth with life and fruit and colour. The orator knows the value of suppressed power—what it is to breathe on his audience's heart to the verge of passion, and then, leaving them with that thrill, to drop the veil again. So does the skilled book—it exhausts nothing; you feel it glows with thought, but it is thought enchaining you by that, the highest of all power—its glow half revealed, yet half concealed. An hundred things testify the same truth. The escaping stream, compressed into one narrow sluice, in its rush through that channel has a power that would be lost were the bank broken and the whole waters scattered in a broad but shallow bed. The fire caught in the

furnace chimney roars with strength, that, were it released in the open field, would disperse and fade. The loophole-ray of light falling on a dark picture awakens an effect that in the full inlet of day would be destroyed. The rule, then, my reader, is the same as regards our gifts from Heaven. We shall best use them in a reserved way, as did Moses with the flame he caught upon the mount. Certainly I would mean no compromise with lower things for one moment, and no suppression of the grace of God in us from that fear of man which we are well assured brings a snare ; but I mean that quiet life which puts itself forth only so far as it can "commend the truth to every man's conscience in the sight of God"—which has regard to every opportunity and circumstance and risk—which moves its veil aside and lets its illumining fall fuller here, say in its own family circle or in converse with its friend—which draws the shade again and makes softer light there, say in miscellaneous society or in the cold circle of public gaze—which is thus intuitively thoughtful and wise in its own deep modesty—jealous that God's gift in it shall not on the one hand repel, shall not, on the other hand, be so exposed and made so common as to draw contempt—ardent, on the contrary, that it may so live behind its veil, now shedding forth a gleam of power, again retreating into shadow, as that even in an evil world it may gain tolerance from all, it may, in its true presence of God within it

and about it, hush the unbelief of all, it may, by its suppressed yet vivid charm, draw many insensibly to the feet of Christ. Such is what I mean : where the unveiled light, paraded vehemently in the cause of God, fails, the veiled light, moving gently like the wise, thoughtful steps of Moses through the camp of Israel, wins the victory.

I know that it is irksome to the thought of not a few, that their souls should be bound up by any restraint in the service of their Lord. They are as those who have a fire within their bones, a woe upon their heads, if they preach not the gospel ; seeing that their time is short, therefore, they demand expression of the most eager and unhampered kind. Yet I will venture to say that, with that spiritual intensity in them, longing to be rid of its own tale, while it is God's will first to kindle it, it is God's will and wisdom further, that it be not vented forth in indiscriminate fire—rather that a power be exercised of retaining the torture in the bones, only letting out a shoot of expression here and another there, but not the whole pent-up fire, since the pent-up fire, once let loose, would burn out once for all, but so retained, becomes to itself a perpetual stimulus—gives each outshot flame a more vivid strength, and holds its heart set on God in deeper power. Those know this who are abashed by the presence of ungenial elements on some occasion or other *when they do long to stand forth and speak their*

whole soul for God ; but instead of that they are flung back upon themselves, tongue-tied and miserable. Yet probably it is better in the case it should be so, for the heart, unrelieved, only burns all the more ardently to tell its burden forth again. And those again know it who have been made the prisoners of God's dealing—who have had their strength broken in its noon—who, with great ambition to be heralds of the Cross, and with much in Christ's name to preach, and a whole life of eager energies in them to pour forth, yet are thrust aside in the midst, are made to bow to the yoke of feebleness and pain, and while they fain would be up and in the battle, must lie down in fruitless longing on their beds. Yet it is God teaching over again the lesson of the veiled light. Even in your time of helplessness, and, as you think, your uselessness, my reader, God breathes on the confined flame more closely at the heart ; its own longing after Him and His work feeds it the more ; if He hinders it outwardly and checks it by the veil on it of the weak body and the broken powers, it is only that He may keep it and intensify it into the very consuming of His love. Oh, trust God, therefore, in the restraints He imposes on His own gift ! He in His divine tenderness and wisdom knows best when we should glow forward into light—when we should sink back and be shaded in the darkness ; only, behind the hindering veil that in one shape or other must always be flung on us while we are on earth, be-

hind that veil let it be more and more ours to cherish God's Spirit—to keep the light strong and pure. And we have this blessed resource always, that, suppressed without as to men, we are never suppressed inwardly as to God ; the veil upon the face, darkening us to the world's sight, may be torn off the face, and the face without a shadow when we turn to pour the heart out in His sight, like Moses when he put the veil off always as he entered the tabernacle, and in the Presence there restrained the light upon his face no more. So what we cannot speak, the grief we cannot syllable, the longings we cannot find scope for, the sickness of heart-love we cannot disburthen to the world ; all these we can utter in a flood to God—we have always our refuge *there*. When we are alone with Him we can let the fire leap up unrestrainedly ; we need no longer stint words to tell how our heart breaketh for the longing thereof ; in the fulness of love, unsatisfied in all else but satisfied in Him, we can say out at last, “Thou art all my salvation, and all my desire !”



CHAPTER XIX.

*The Sin of Strange Fire.*



THE tabernacle was by this time pitched on the broad plain fronting Sinai, and all its holy garniture was complete : the Shekinah burned on the interior mercy-seat, and the cloud of God's presence rose above the tabernacle roof. For the priestly services Aaron and his sons were elaborately set apart ; and, after seven days of ceremonial consecration, on the eighth day they came, in sight of the assembled people, to the first performance of their high functions. In his gorgeous dress Aaron was led through the sanctuary by the privileged hand of Moses—the latter holding a place with Heaven even loftier than a high priest's office could bestow. Thereafter, the sacred rites in the Holy of Holies done, they reappeared together at the tabernacle door—the smoke of sacrifice and the breath of incense filled the air—and in a vast circle the Israelite thousands looked in breathlessly upon the spot ; when, as the brothers threw back the blazoned curtain and came forth from God, suddenly a divine glow shed itself on them and all the place, the glory of the Lord was seen, and fire from heaven streamed on the altar, consuming its burnt-offering, and in its wavering and

awful beauty teaching Israel, that, in this their first sanctuary worship, God was well pleased. At the sight the people gave a great shout, and fell on their faces.

But a minute afterwards, unexpectedly and terribly, this pause of prostration was disturbed. Nadab and Abihu, two of the sons of Aaron, who, along with himself, had been robed and anointed for the office of the priesthood, drew nigh, bearing with them each his censer. It must have been a singular infatuation prompted their behaviour next: for but recently they had, by express arrangement, been of the chosen company who were led up on the hill-side to see the vision of the God of Israel. They had been witnesses then of the splendour of the Most High: and now, not less marked by favour, they stood in a place second only to their father Aaron in these sublime tabernacle rites; and before their very eyes there played over the altar's face the flame from heaven. One would have imagined therefore that, if they must burn their pots of incense before God, these two men, of all others, would have knelt down in humbleness and faith—would have sought but to catch one lambent touch from the divine fire, and, with that kindling, to have then held out their steaming vessels in offering to God. But, strangely presumptuous, or unbelieving, or negligent of any value the heavenly could have over the earthly, they struck, in their censers, the light of common fire,

—they passed the altar flame by, and they dared, perhaps without any great conscience of their sin, to present themselves and their offering thus on the holy ground. In a moment they were rebuked beyond penitence or rescue,—the fire of God's anger leaped forth, and in its sharp, noiseless gleam, as it were the gleam of lightning, slew them where they stood. Not one word of murmur rose from Israel: even the horror-stricken father felt the deed of God was righteous; for as Moses, looking on the scathed corpses, vindicated the holy precincts and the holy way of God, it is affectingly added, "Aaron held his peace!" Nor could the brothers of the slain men so much as touch them or carry them forth; the pollution of the dead could not be left on their consecrated robes or person; and while other kinsmen did the ghastly office, carrying the bodies in their coats through the appalled groups of Israel and out of the camp, Aaron and these other sons were, by the stern, and yet, as they must have felt, the truly thoughtful, command of Moses, forbidden even to give one sign of grief, or to step one pace out of the tabernacle bounds, lest they too should die.

Was the death of Nadab and Abihu, then, not a cruel stroke pitilessly disproportioned to their sin?—or if not, how do we explain that what seems, at first glance, and reckoned by an ordinary standard, a sin so venial, was yet punished so swiftly and wrathfully at the hand of God? We can, without hesitation, answer:

God's doom was just—Moses exclaimed it was so—and Aaron, moved as he must have been by the spectacle of his own two children dead in their manhood and in their priestly honours at his feet, allowed it was so in the silence of his heart. And the reason simply was, that, in proportion to the sacredness of the scene and the height of the solemnity in which the offenders stood, so necessarily was the heinousness of their sin. One speck on the brilliance of the steel mirror, one stain on the snow-white garment, are more than the darkest flaw on a common metal, or the foulest blot on a dress weather-beaten and worn. For the sin of strange fire, little as it seemed in common thought, was a spot of contempt, or unbelief, or recklessness, or call it what we will, flung on the pure ineffable front of God's worship—and that worship too in its first unfolding of a dread ceremonial to the eyes of Israel. It was a sin therefore whose circumstances aggravated it into the blackness of daring crime: considering the occasion, and the moment, and the favoured and instructed men who were the transgressors, it was a sin that became more intense in guilt an hundredfold than even deep moral crime, perpetrated on common ground, and by wretched workers of wickedness, who, in untaught misery of their lives, might know no better. While for the latter there might be the plea of ignorance, and a relenting and a pity might be drawn from heaven, for the sin of strange fire,

in its wilfulness and daringness and perfect light of knowledge round it, there could be no place of mercy ; it was simply of a righteous necessity that the offerers of the outrage on God should die.

*We* are not invested with the same sort of priestly character and attribute as were these hapless two slain at the altar ; nevertheless, we minister behind the shadow of our one great High Priest, Jesus Christ, and the ground we stand on, as in service and worship we draw near God thus in our modern day, is as holy and perilous as was the sacred circle round the tabernacle threshold where Nadab and Abihu fell. Are *we* always moved by the memory of their sin and fate ? And do we think what we do when, like them, we stand with our censers of ministry before God ? Shall we look what kind of glow it is flashes in the pot ? Shall we examine conscience on the subject, and find out how much in the ministry and work of God there mingle an hundred impurities of motive,—how much mere seeming fire, how cold as dead ashes the secret heart,—how much the occasion is seized for the figuring of intellectual display,—how much for mere self-seeking, vanity, craving to be seen and heard of men,—how many ingredients of common worldly passion are sown through the soul in the unsanctified existence of ordinary days,—the very soul that presents itself as the highest vessel of the congregation, charged, to appearance, with the fire of God's Spirit in the solemn wor-

ship of the Lord's-day? Is the burning in such a vessel a burning of earth, or of heaven,—is it a fire so strange to God that not even a breath of prayer has blown it at its lighting up,—or is it the clear lambency of God's Spirit, borrowed from His holy altar, “incense and a pure offering,” with which He is well pleased? Alas, alas! I do not think conscience can stand much deep catechising on this dread subject without blenching. If it spoke true, I fear it would tell that, over the broad surface of the Church at this day, if, of all those ten thousand lights kept alive, and many of them splendidly lustrous, at the altars of the Most High God, those were watered down that have caught their inspiration, not from the fire of Heaven above, but from some false human fire stirred below, light on light would unexpectedly go out, the scene so blazoned now would change into a waste of extinct censers, many an eloquent pulpit would be dumb, many a front rank service would drop back to hide its head. And, if you looked where the true lights kept glowing palely but serenely here and there, you would find them probably, not in the place of some gorgeous ceremonial, or under some noble church roof, or in the footsteps of some signally-gifted life,—*these* might be spots of strewn ashes merely,—while the pure flame of God might be found most in the meeting-place of some simple but true worship, in the piety and faith of some holy but nameless hearts. Indeed, when one but glances into



the depth of his own ambitions,—the hundred considerations that in God's work have stimulated him, arising out of earth and self, and the small, faint quickening he has given entrance to from heaven,—he cannot but fear lest God's patience should be done with him,—lest the mercy that has borne with so much affront offered against the very presence of the holy God and in the place of His sanctuary should be withdrawn at last, and the soul, for its sin of strange fire, should die. Could he have contracted a worse guilt suppose he had been some wretched heathen, bowing down to stocks and stones,—or suppose, uninstructed in his life, he had broken law by some glaring crime? Privileged so high, handling things so sacred, standing in his sanctity and service so near God, does it not strike him there is a terror in his sin of strange fire that singles him out with tenfold prominence? Truly, did the common eye have power to see on what a brink he stands,—did he himself but realise it for a moment, I think both would shudder at the sight; instead of shrinking and complaining under the humblings and the rebukes God's hand often deals His ministers in their pride, I think he himself would then come to thank God that he *should* be chastised for his transgression,—sore chastised, but, in that very soreness of chastisement, not given over unto death,—rather that it should be a token to him of God's righting *him* and sparing him and making his eye and heart pure, *perhaps* in great

mercy to send him back, with heaven-lit censer, to minister again under the high shadow of Christ ; if not, to teach him that, brought to a right mind and saved though by a day of humiliation and distress here, that is but a light thing compared with perishing in sudden overthrow hereafter ; for, my reader, if you be in any way a minister of Christ and of His work, you cannot but remember, that the long minglings in your censer, and the fires you have offered numberlessly before Him, will pass in terrible review again at the altar of the great day, and that it will then be “a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

But it must be further added, that if all this be so, we have a startling light indeed thrown on much of our modern condition before God by the sin of Nadab and Abihu. Who believes in the fire from heaven still coming down and lighting on our worship scenes and scattering itself in its baptism of the Spirit on our hearts ? Who stakes his faith and trust in that simple but Divine element—the breath of the Holy Spirit ? Is it looked for in ordinance ? Do we resort to our Bibles to find it glow in word and promise ? Do we credit it when it stirs abroad, quickening and reviving the Church, converting sinners, building up saints ? Do we believe fervently that we *have* this Spirit as the Lord’s gift from heaven,—that if we come still in the good way, the old path of the shed blood of Jesus, our church and other altars do yet gleam with this Spirit ?

Or do many, many not pass into God's presence indifferently, irreverently, unbelievingly, to stand by the old cistern but to find it dry, to stand by the old hearth but to find its embers cold, to stand by the old altar but to find its surface blank? How can worship acceptable to the living God, then, be paid? He would bestow the fiery gift if He saw but one heart with simple faith raised to heaven; but men pass in and out in worship, and they either offer some strange fire of feeling or of thought, or of one knows not well what, or they carry with them censers fireless altogether and dead.

Hence in this neglect—this mechanical discredit even many who serve at the altar throw on the living power of God from heaven—one cannot but think there has originated that kind of cool and ready sympathy of many with a great many elements that are obtruded now-a-days into the circle of God's worship, and that yet are not by any means instinct with the fire of God's Spirit—not so much, indeed, as even touched by that Spirit on their edge. The supernatural side of worship is rationalised away. There are to be liberal interpretations made of all men's tenets. We are not to deem even the vital points of the gospel such as we are to place much importance by. We are to make free with anything and everything in the Word of God. We are to believe that there are many ways of devoutly worshipping God, besides the good old way that now too

much is fallen disused ; that God will accept *all* honest offerings ; and there is no necessity whatever hangs on the mysterious baptism of the Holy Ghost and of fire so many in their simple faith have clung to as all in all. So by some there is a summary eliding at the threshold of all tokens of a heavenly grace. By some there are easy freedoms assumed as to God's worship, that make all ordinance simply convenient, or, in its presence or its absence, wholly indifferent. By some, moral worth, quite unstamped though it be by the power of God's grace, is reckoned an undoubtedly rightful claimant on Heaven—an offering, not through the gospel channel, it is true, but an offering God will assuredly accept. By some the gifts of genius, the glorious creations and victories of mind in the world, are pointed to, and it is asked, Are these, though unbaptized by gospel faith, to be exorcised out of the kingdom of heaven ?

My reader, in reply, we simply fall back on God's divine record. It may sound a terrible and sweeping act to cut off a whole world of mind and worth, and, in many of its aspects, noble human life, and, because it wants what we deem the one thing needful, to put it under ban of rejection in the sight of God ; but who has ever had title to authorise a relaxing of the clear appointments of His Word, set forth clear in our sight as the flame that in Nadab and Abihu's sight came down *from* heaven ?—who has ever had title to erase, either

half or wholly, such momentous matters as the blood of Jesus, as the necessary life of God's Spirit, from the finger-posts and milestones on the heavenward path?—who ever has had title given to worship God in a large and negligent way, that omits God's own prime condition, and yet boldly claims to walk with *any* earth-kindled fire-censer on that very ground where Nadab and Abihu, for a like crime, perished? Let us have these questions well answered, and we shall concede the latitude required; but, until then, we must abide by the gospel at once of "the goodness and severity of God." We must at all risks stand in the good way, and ask for the old paths. We must not shrink from it—that if men quench in themselves and in their worship the one fiery particle from heaven—if they put the strange fire of some will-worship in its place,—however high their endowments and rich their life otherwise, they are utterly alien to God—nay, by these very endowments, by the place they stand in, by the awful sacredness of those things they tamper with,—so grievous is their sin made before God, that that very fire of divine gift, which, if they would but borrow it, would blessedly awake the censers of their offering and life into flame,—cannot but, as in the case of Nadab and Abihu, one way or other, leap forth upon them that they die. Let us fear, then, as we enter into the cloud. Let us see we have Him who said, "I the Lord thy God am a jealous God," to deal with as we

come. Let us ask that He Himself put the live coal from off the heavenly altar on our hearts ; and then, as we draw near, so quickened and enkindled, we may never let our eyes waver from these two fore-front texts of Scripture :—" Jesus said, I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life ; no man cometh unto the Father *but* by Me !" And, " Except a man be born again, he *cannot* see the kingdom of God ! "

CHAPTER XX.

*The Graves of Lust.*





At last, the long sojourn at the foot of Sinai came to an end ; the tribes of Israel were numbered and disposed with the regularity of an army ; the tabernacle was lifted ; the trumpet-signals given ; the tents struck, and the march forward into "the great and terrible wilderness" began. As mass after mass of the people disappeared through the eastern defiles, gradually silence and desertion fell on a scene late so astir with sublime events—the mantle of God was unrolled off the high sides of Sinai, and presently that mount, now memorable for ever in Israelite association and story, was left alone, all its peaks in the sunshine still and bare.

The path struck out by the Israelites, under the guidance of the pillared cloud, as well as by the lynx-eyed accuracy of Hobab, Moses' brother-in-law, and a denizen of that very desert, was one that, after several stages, led through difficult passes into a broad sand tract, expanded drearily before them, and roughened by the billow-like shapes of low sand hills. Behind them, the heights of the Sinai group they had left stood up in serrated battlements ; before them was this waste of desert, belted north and east by other dim

mountain ridges ; and on the right, down a wild torrent bed marked with the track of ancient ruin, now riverless and dry, a glimpse of the sea of Akaba sparkled distantly, with the faint outline of the far Arabian heights beyond. As the people journeyed on thus, discontent under change had kept uttering its murmur through their ranks ; the kind of settled half-home life they had led for so many months under Sinai was broken, and they were now cast again on the wide, homeless wilderness ; wherefore the old murmurous spirit broke out incorrigibly. God had borne with them much before Sinai ; but after the lessons and the life in His own presence around Sinai, nigh a whole year, His patience waned fast now, and but for Moses, He would have made sharp and sudden end of all Israel on the spot. As it was, a fire flew forth from Him round the borders of the camp, catching the thick shrub plants that ran like network on the soil, and from these blazing fiercely among the nearest tents, till the whole camp-ground was girt with a line of flame. Many fell victims in the fiery onset ; but at the cry of Moses, God stayed the consuming of His wrath again. Still, no sooner had He done so, and while the prints of the destroyer were hardly yet cold, than the perverse rebelliousness of the people woke anew. It was as a serpent scotched, not killed,—each visitation of the Lord repressing it for the moment, but by and by moving it to deeper virulence. So “the

mixed multitude" who had followed the march out of Egypt, having, in their low-pitched existence, first taken up the tale, it was soon spread through the whole people like a wild contagion. They saw the bare desert stretched before them waste on waste—not one growth grateful to the palate did it offer—of the simple manna food of God they were weary—and in face of such change, and bleak prospect, and, it might be, utter want, the old pungent memories of the plants of Egypt came across them, and, degraded to this low level of the mere lust of food, they wept in their tents, crying, "Who shall give us flesh to eat?" Had it been such an hour as that in which, before the gift of manna, they had been looking famine in the face, both Divine and human patience might have found excuse for them; but now, in the midst of manna plenty, it was a sheer and shameless abandonment of themselves to the grovelling of abject appetite alone; and Moses, driven beyond bearing, appealed in impetuous prayer to God, crying that the burden of this whole people crushed him—that it was impossible he could sustain it more—and that, if it *was* decreed to lie on his heart, he would sooner at once die.

God was pitiful, not to the people, but to his heart-broken servant, and in His pity, told him He would ease his burden in a twofold way. First, He would give of the Spirit that rested on Moses to seventy elders of the people Moses should himself select, and

they should be his assessors in controlling the unmanageable, infatuated throng. Next, He would rain quails on the camp, till the people should be fed full, not only up to the measure of their lust, but for days and days beyond it, till the thing they lusted for would turn into loathing and a curse. Accordingly, Moses drew up his list of seventy, and God, taking of the Spirit wherewith he himself had been gifted, breathed it on these seventy, and in the tabernacle where they were assembled they began to prophesy. We have seen how single and ungrudging Moses was in his heart, when, on a former occasion, his rule in Israel had been divided, and in so far parted from him. Not less generously ungrudging was he now. The Spirit that was lit upon the hearts and lips of these seventy was, in plain terms, taken from him—seventy flames kindled at, and abstracted from, his one super-eminent, and hitherto solitary, flame; but just as one star, touching many other dead torches in the heavens, might kindle them round into stars also, and would be lessened not one whit in its own light, only in the ring of clustered luminaries becoming less marked, perhaps, than when it glowed solitary against the night—so Moses gave to the elders of the Spirit in him without an hairbreadth of real loss—fast as he gave, the divine effluence, far from ebbing in his own soul, rebaptizing it and enlarging it afresh,—to that extent, indeed, of high abolishing of self, and putting it for ever out of sight, that, when

news came that two of the seventy, accidentally left in the camp, had yet caught the Spirit there, and were prophesying, Moses rebuked the simple jealousy that broke from the lips of Joshua, and in words notable for all who take part, high or low, in God's work, said, "Enviest thou for my sake? Would God that *all* the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them!"

Then followed the second wonder of God's promise. There had been some shade of incredulity in the mind of Moses, when, looking on the thousands of Israel blackening the face of the desert, he had asked God how it was possible flesh should be for so many mouths? Would the flocks and herds be slain for them, or the sea glimmering there in the distance give up its stores? But the Lord had thrust these questions off with the greater question—Was *His* hand waxed short? And accordingly, when the hour came, He sent forth a wind upon the deep, and flights of quails were driven inland before it, right over, and for a vast space on all sides about, the camp, in such living multitude that literally not only the air, but the ground where they fell, swarmed to darkness with them; and for a night and two days, the people toiled at nothing but this great harvest of their lust. But even while their homers were being laden, and in their greedy, thankless haste, the flesh of the quails was being thrust between their teeth, God's anger could not be restrained, and He

smote them with a plague born of the very banquet they were gloating over, so that even while they ate many of them died. It was a signal lesson—their prayer granted, but with a curse about its neck—the flesh they wept for given to repletion, but in it the seed of reaction, of loathsomeness, of death—and, to signalise the lesson more to all time, the scene where the plague-stricken died and were buried was called Kibroth-hattaavah—"the graves of lust."

In one of those deeply-resonant psalms in which, in times long after, the Hebrews loved to recount in the temple their forefathers' wilderness story, this lesson is more than alluded to when it is said, "He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul." It was, in short, another turn in the wheel of God's varied dealing. Had He refused the flesh that was wept for, possibly at the cost of present pain and privation, He might have won the thanks of Israel after; by holding back the wave of miserable desire in them, He might, one would say, have preserved some spiritual ground within their hearts clear for His divine purposes and influences; but by this time there was need to teach them another dreadful chapter of His ways instead, and He therefore gave them their request; He let in the full flood of earthly desire, but, in that letting in, the last grain of spiritual footing in the nature so let loose, and yielded to, and satiated, was *overswept* and lost. To the body, such a feast as even

the greedy eye wearied over; but to the soul within, leanness. What other consequence, my reader, *could* ensue? We know that in every creature God has made in this world there is but a certain measure of vital being assigned—a certain life-current brimming to its edge, and for all the creature's ordinary purposes enough, but nought beyond; and if that current be distributed in just proportion through the frame, every organ will be in equal play; but if divided, wrongfully and shortsightedly, too much of the current turned into one direction, necessarily either too little flows in some other direction, or the stream altogether attenuates and dies. Mark the class of sea animals that are endowed naturally with the organs of vision, but, by their living wholly in the dark of far-withdrawn caves, are said, in that perverse life, gradually to lose their first power, and the very eyes to shrivel in their sockets. Mark, in the human body, the effect of any laborious work straining one limb or organ heavily and for a length of time—the other limbs grow feeble, and their muscles shrink. Mark also, when you rise to a higher scale,—the ardour of the student drives the mind into a passionate whirl, but it drains the body of its health, and ultimately, it may be, its life. And mark, rising higher yet, the man who lives absorbingly in public life, be it even of the most patriotic sort,—yet how often has it with truth been said that the intensity of flow the one way dries up the quieter graces of the heart in

other ways—the man so eminent in public is a rare guest at his own hearth, and when there is miserable and blank. So, truest of all is this striking principle, as to the balance in us of the earthly and the spiritual. God does not mean the earthly in our nature to be wholly uprooted and destroyed. He gave warrant so far to the *first* cry of Israel for food, by answering them with the daily shower of manna ; and as for us, there is that one middle petition in our Lord's prayer which absolutely teaches us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread !" But with all that clearly understood, there is just the one full life-current to be distributed between soul and body ; and if we give the latter more than the above pilgrim petition marks out, if, like the Israelites, we go beyond the daily shower of manna and pine for an overflow of flesh besides, straightway that is diverting to the body more than its regulated share—it is gorging all its sluices and its currents with the life-force God has measured out to us, and of necessity the stream so abstracted runs, in the direction of the soul, dwindled, and, perhaps, altogether dry.

What, for example, is the proverbial effect of a worldly life ? I do not mean a life as being worldly simply because it is led much in the stir and traffic of the world, for the world is the place where God, for the perfecting of their faith, sets all Christians ; and many obtain a large share of the world through inheritance, or through *their own* honourable labours, or in other just ways,



who yet hold the balance most signally between the seen and the unseen—between the body and the soul ; who walk with noble, exemplary steps on the difficult edge, diligent in their calling on the earthly side, and yet on the heavenly side fervent in spirit, serving God. Of these we say that their secret is, they keep their heart-desires right. God sends them great worldly gains, not because they have lusted for them, or, once grasping them, would in the miser-spirit hoard them, but because they are good depositaries of wealth ; the gifts of God flow through their hands plentifully for the blessing and the help of others ; and, therefore, still more liberally, they have their basket and their store increased, but never to their soul's decrease ; on the contrary, (to transpose the terms of St John's saying,) their souls prosper and are in health, even as their estate in the world prospers.

Such, therefore, I do not mean when I speak of worldly life ; but I mean life which, spent much in the world, gets entangled with a love of, and a thirst for, it ; and whose whole horizon-view is bounded by the desires and existence this world stimulates. What is proverbial of such a life ? Is it not that, in proportion as the earthly rises in it, the spiritual sinks ? A man gets into the eager chase of money, for example, for money's sake ; as he grows to the riches of a Dives outside, does he not grow poor as a beggar in the heart within ? Or a man lets in on him a taste for the am-

bitions, or the vanities, or the enjoyments, the world offers ; the more hours and thoughts he consumes outside in these, does not the whisper come fainter and rarer of the neglected soul within ? Or a man is by degrees wrought into a thick-set growth of the anxieties and cares of business ; under that choking growth outside does the small spiritual seed not perish at its heart-root within ? We all know, in short, that whatever draws the soul more to earth draws it, in that degree, more from Heaven ; that whatever is a gain of mere lust—mere unhallowed, selfish, overstretched desire—is a leanness to that extent sent into the soul ; that if the current flows deep and strong, and ever deeper and stronger the one way, it necessarily exhausts the whole life-force—the body drains the soul—the material, by its suction, enfeebles to its last drop the spiritual the other way ; till, when the case, as it often does, runs into excess—(for lust that has attained its end does not rest sated there, but its curse is to beget lust an hundredfold)—then in that excess we have the spectacle—the sorrowful spectacle—of a man's life running on the world's side with the strength and fulness of a river, all the energies and interest having full play there ; and, on the side of God, diminished to a thread-like rill, or, in darkness and stagnancy, dropped and lost. Indeed we have the same picture under other words presented by our Lord, when He conjures up the last

stage of that frightful contrast—the pampered body, the wasted soul—the earthly filling all the foreground, the spiritual behind it shrunken to a ghost—and asks, “What doth it profit a man, though he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”

Let us be afraid, then, and deeply watchful, not only what we ask, but what we inarticulately wish from heaven. Yea, let us be afraid what earthly thing we fix on, that we may desire it even in the secret of our souls. All our *real* cravings go out from us constantly, and, as on a clear page, are read by God. Wherefore, should He give us our desire—should He put the very morsel we are hungering for,—money, place in the world, vengeance on an adversary, pleasure, sin, earthly success, or whatever it may be,—should He give us that very morsel between our teeth, we may be sure it is an omen that should make us anything but rejoice; that leanness is sent into the soul withal; and that, in the very moment of our lust snatching its banquet, like the flesh the Israelites devoured, it will be turned into our plague. Even those who have stood in a very holy place beside God’s altar have had reason oftentimes to sorrow that they allowed other seeking than the seeking of God’s glory to move them thither—prizes of earthly honour, of advantage, nay, even of sordid gain; and that God, giving them their desires to the full, has sent also the inevitable counterbalancing curse, blight-

ing to all their graces, emaciation and deathlike palsy into the soul. I repeat, therefore, let us think what it is we ask—what it is in our inner heart we wish. Dare we see it realised and brought home to us—the gift, but the millstone God puts as the condition round its neck—the brightness, but the spectral shadow in its steps? Dare we accept a too full-fed worldly estate as the happiest; or, knowing God's awful manner, would we not recoil from it as the reverse? And, on the other hand, if the desires of our folly have *not* been granted us, neither strength, nor health, nor gain, nor high places, nor anything beyond pilgrim simplicity and pilgrim sparseness, let us, as we journey on, learn to give God praise that He has not visited us with that last token of His anger—cast us off, that we may have our desires as the Israelites had their quails; that, hindering us in our earthward frowardness, He is, in that, drawing out and turning on the current of our life heavenward; that, making the one stream run scanty, He is causing the other stream to flash and deepen in its bed; that, denying the body even till it is like Lazarus at the rich man's gate, He pours a double and a treble blessing in through all the flood-gates of the soul. Let us not tempt Him as the Israelites tempted; when we pray or wish, let our fervour flow out unrepressed for things spiritual; when we turn towards the things temporal, let us tread in

hesitancy and fear, saying, in the words of Agur, "Give me neither poverty nor riches ; feed me with food convenient for me ;" and translating into ourselves that still more God-observant saying of St Paul, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content."



## CHAPTER XXI.

### Miriam's Humiliation.

1. The first part of the document is a list of names and titles, including:



It was destined that Moses should not find many days' repose in the thorny leadership of Israel. Scarce had the plague, springing from the people's lust, abated, and the camp been pitched another stage forward in the broad desert of Hazeroth, than his new grief arose; and this time it was the bitterer that his adversaries were those of his own household. His sister Miriam, whom God had distinguished in Israel by her gifts as a prophetess, began to give utterance to an envy of him which had very likely long been lurking in her heart. Now she whispered it in the ear of Aaron, whose easy temper fell the victim of her stronger passions. It was under the cover of jealousy for their pure Israelite blood she made the charge against Moses, it is true, for she affected to make it out sin that he had married a Cushite woman; but, with that plea on her tongue, it was the serpent envy that was really at bottom in her heart. Yet it is difficult to conceive such utterness of folly, not to say wickedness. She existed under the mere shadow of Moses; she and Aaron were great in Israel because Moses first was great; and to look at him as he presided in the camp, and to mark how,

“ Deep on his brow engraven,  
Deliberation sat and public care ; ”

to think what a weight of all the people's government, and sins, and sufferings he bore ; how he had triumphed through so many dread wilderness events ; and how he had been the daily associate of the mighty God ; and yet to dream that she, a woman, could displace him, or so much as touch a corner of his burden with her little finger, was surely a dream of the wildest presumption. But be all these things as they might, Miriam it would seem proposed no less for herself than an equality of rule at least,—for Aaron she brought in as a mere makeweight in the case,—and, accordingly, her appeal at once and claim were that God had spoken by her as well as by Moses. Moses was silent—perhaps in great wonderment, perhaps in grief. But God at that moment interposed to rebuke the treacherous and thankless two. He summoned them along with Moses to the tabernacle door ; there He brooded over them in a cloud ; and, most probably before all Israel, He spoke to them from the angry darkness. He told them they, and such-like prophets as they, were at best but dreamers of dreams, and seers of visions ; that God revealed Himself to them thus dimly and distantly, but with His servant Moses He would talk mouth to mouth ; He would uncover to him His rarest glory ; He would shew him the very similitude of God. Wherefore, then, were they not afraid to speak against him ? With

these words, the cloud rolled off, and Miriam was beheld where she stood a miserable leper, white as snow. Aaron repented deeply, and cried to his brother to have pity ; whereupon in the first words he had yet permitted to break from him, Moses in his turn cried to God. Fitting it was that in so wretched an exposure of the family heart such should have been the first words heard from the great servant of the Lord. But the answer was not one of immediate mercy. The crime of Miriam had been too excuseless and outrageous ; and she must, therefore, like others, fall under the ban of the leprosy law. So she was led out of the camp, and left for seven days ; and in that avoided, loathsome, branded state, we can think of the proud prophetess, who had led the timbrels of the Israelite women by the Red Sea, and had been ever since as a queen in honour,—we can think of her as sitting out-cast on the ground, her robe drawn over head and face, and drinking the cup of humiliation to the dregs.

What we are struck with first is, the wonder that, in a family circle so lifted on the platform of Divine grace and honour, there should have been all at once brought to light a flaw so bitter and so deadly. Had Moses stirred the envy of any of the other outside chiefs of Israel,—had there been an eye of smouldering fire and a lip of base depreciation set on him from any other quarter of the camp, we could, according to what we know of human nature, make some allowance, and ac-

count the case at least credible. But that from his own flesh and blood, Aaron and Miriam, who had gained all in his rise, and to whom his honour should have been as their own, and dearer,—that from the woman's heart and hand of the latter especially the poisoned shaft should have been shot against him—was surely too monstrous to be believed. How could the host they were at the head of look at it,—how could God, whose name and cause they had in charge, regard it? Yet, sooth to tell, the Miriam spirit is no such strange thing in the world, we fear, as all this would make appear. Punished by the leprous stroke in the wilds of Hazeroth, it has revived into deadliness in a thousand scenes since. We know, for example, how even the family group of our Lord's disciples, knit, one would think, in so sacred a bond, was torn with jealousies and dissension. We know how, later, Paul was undervalued by the very men he had made converts to the gospel, and who were members with him of the same household of faith,—how they seized the day of his distress to level bitter sneers against him, and to snatch the standard he had up-borne so grandly into their own rash, ineffective hands. We know how he felt the stab; yet how splendid the magnanimity with which he struck aside the viperous spirit and its stab together, saying, "Notwithstanding, every way Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice." And we know, further, how, in all strenuous

projects and crises of the Church, envy has slid in even among men in the forefront of the battle ; there has been fierce contention for the place of honour, and such rupture and ruin to the cause of God in consequence, that the enemy has rushed in and the ark of God been taken. And we know, still further, how, in the Church of Christ now, and amongst those who are its gaged and sworn leaders, the unhappy spirit is not dead but lives,—talents that are serving in the same holy work with us are underrated, high success done in name of the same Christ we follow is taken down, high gifts are lessened, high attainments are explained away, and, while we plead lofty pleas of disinterestedness, and such-like, as Miriam pled on the score of her and Aaron's family honour—underneath, in the insinuations of our lips and the real thought of our hearts, there is too, too often the same trailing serpent that in her would have stung even her noble brother to death. We have asked what thought the host of Israel at the spectacle,—what thought that great God of Israel under the shadow of whose name it was Miriam gave her bad passions play ? An hundred times more may we ask, what men think of *us*, who, under the Christian mask, not generously rejoice in all good for Christ's sake, but meanly lower here, coldly freeze into discouragement there ? What impression can we suppose the world takes on if passions, prompting thus, smoulder and occasionally break fiercely out in the household of God.

and, above all, what can the all-searching Lord think, in Whose field we labour, on Whose holy ground we seize occasion for the treacherous aggrandising and strife of self—Whose are all gifts, and all worthy deeds, and all illustrious work, and yet Whose glory in them all we would rather see blotted out than that, with their high contrast above ourselves, they should cross our gaze? Is it not grief and anger to the Spirit of our God that we thus, like Miriam, would pluck His own crown off His servant's brow? Do we not deserve to be humbled as were she and Aaron down to the stature of our own real littleness? And has there not been ground given why a magnanimous heart, such as that of Moses, should be pointed to as almost the wonder of a generation—so sorrowfully rare is it, alas!—one so arrayed in gifts, and yet who could break into that simple outburst we have already quoted—"Enviest thou for my sake? Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!"

So, further, as we read the tale of this family breach, the rebuke of God, and the leprous blight thrown on Miriam, teach us not only of the hatefulness of envy, but of the exceeding goodness and beauty of each one in God's household being quietly contented in His own gift. Miriam forgot herself through her having been upraised in her brother's fortunes, and so sharing some measure of his prophet power from heaven; she was

tempted thus to extend her grasp, as though to clutch from him the heavy sceptre of Israel. How much better had she been meekly thankful for that measure of distinction God, for Moses' sake, had seen fit to bestow on her! What a place of unbroken honour and memory she would have retained in Israel had she held back her weak woman's hand to its natural task,—to ring its soft cadence on the timbrel, or to ply the homely, but for her more fitting, sceptre of the distaff! She would have saved that episode of shame,—she would have sat chief of Israelite women instead of falling, as she did, to be the leprous gazing-stock of all the camp. So it is wisest far to fall in with God's gift and place for us. Letting alone that hardly any misery is greater than an ambition fostered in a man that aims higher than his powers will carry him, what would be the result suppose the success and influence we grudge enviously in some one else were laid for us to wield at our feet? The wayside flower is sweet in its lowly spot, but it could not for a moment hold the place of the giant tree that is rocking its branches in the storm. The inland stream is sweet in its modest windings, making green its meadows; but it could not for a moment fill the deep gulf-channel on whose waves fleets are borne. In the shepherd-boy's hand the sling and the five smooth pebbles from the brook are an effective weapon; but if he sheathed himself in Saul's armour, Saul's fortune in the fight would never follow him; beyond doubt he

would perish. So, pilgrim of the Cross, seek the true honour God assigns you in the circle of your place and gifts. Mark not how lowly these are—they are true and honourable as given of God ; and, in putting them to single, quiet, earnest use in His service, they are increased in honour, as Miriam was increased in honour ere the spirit of the tempter breathed in her and she fell : whereas, to look beyond, except with loving and unjealous eyes, into the brighter circle of another's gifts, —to seek to grasp that we cannot wield,—or, failing that, to lessen its repute,—to put the stigma on it of its being base coin and worthy only to be struck out of the currency of God's kingdom,—*this* is not only to destroy the heart out of our own gifts,—to enfeeble what power there is in us to do God service and to hasten on His work, but it is, like Miriam, to overreach ourselves into an exposure of our impotence and folly,—it is to forfeit all the excellence and the beauty of our standing, as she in Israel made sacrifice of hers, and in God's sight it is to share in her humiliation and shame. If there is a sight of nobleness greater than another, it is to witness all in the Church of Christ emulous, each in the consideration of *his own* talent, and, however small or however great, the awful writing on it, " Occupy till I come," —to witness all, when they look on *one another's* talent, still fastening the eyes only on the writing, " Occupy till I come,"—till they mourn all as one heart in any failure,—till they rejoice all as one heart in any triumph,



—till the spirit runs through all of Him they follow, greater yet than Moses,—Him Who in magnanimity has been the grandest the world has ever seen,—“Who made Himself of no reputation,—Who took upon Him the form of a servant,—Who, though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that we through His poverty might be made rich !”

So passes Miriam across the scene under the shadow of her humiliation, and we get no other glimpse of her, save a momentary light in Kadesh, where she died, and her unruly heart at last found quietness in the grave.

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CHAPTER XXII.

*Seen but Lost.*



THE line by which the Israelite march crossed the wild table-land of the desert after leaving Hazeroth led to the next long halting-spot at Kadesh. Whatever be the exact point we assign as Kadesh, it undoubtedly lay in the group of hills clustering themselves round the spurs of Mount Hor, and to the north of the Gulf of Akaba ; and if the conclusions of recent travellers on the scene be correct, it was probably the same as that famous city lying in its rocky cleft, known well to antiquity later than that of Moses, and known to us now under the name of Petra, as a City of the Dead. The site of the city is a long seam which has been torn, several miles in length, and right through the mountain's heart ; the cliffs, especially in the eastern avenue, frown against each other but a few paces apart ; when struck by sunshine, they glow with deep colours of crimson and purple ; they are festooned here and there with the growth of wild plants and creepers high up till the feathery tufts quiver against the line of blue sky ; and at the bottom is the path of pilgrims, as it had been scooped by some old torrent, not of water but of fire. Where the crags

at last recede, opening from this wild and narrow way into a rocky valley, still built round, however, by its sheer rock walls many hundred feet in height, there have been hewn literally into the cliff faces (and no doubt there were even before the Israelites' time) the cave-like temples and dwellings of a great population, till, in its human hive, the whole stone-girdle round and round was scored and honeycombed and made alive. At this day the vast cleft is the very desolation of silence and ruin; but when the Hebrew pilgrimage thronged into its gap, and pitched among its glowing rocks, and found lodging in its caverns, and climbed everywhere to overlook it by its rock-hewn stairs, the picture must have been one on which, at least, human decay had not yet left its trace.

If, then, the fastness of Petra really was the Kadesh of the long Israelite rest, it was from this point spies were sent out, both by God's command and the people's own choice, to search the land. The land, that is, the Canaan land of long hope and promise, lay very near; there were but these north-western ridges to cross and it was in sight; nay, if any one had scaled the shoulders of Hor, the misty ridges veiling the Dead Sea would have been descried. The goal so near, therefore, must have moved the liveliest interest; the dreary desert-life was done, and the long migration of the tribes of God at the very gates of its rest. So the commissioned spies, ten in number, being one from

each tribe except the Levites, very likely departed from the camp with eager convoy. Speedily they were lost to sight on the neutral grounds between the hills and the Canaan border. As they went on, the features of the wilderness, so long familiar, faded ; the palm and the acacia they had been wont to greet in the desert-way were gone ; and now the sprinkling of a green herbage, and the colour of a land of plenty began everywhere to appear. The slopes they had seen looming from afar drew nearer, thicker and ever thicker in their outshaken wealth ; on their crests rose here and there lines of battlement and high cities glancing in the sun ; the glades between were deep and umbrageous ; and as the ten spies plunged into their winding paths, tracked their half-hidden brooks, and ate of the fruit every bough was laden with, it must have been, after their long desert-toil, like the plunging of head and eyes and whole soul into a deep sea of coolness and deliciousness and rest. There, at length, was the land flowing with milk and honey.

The search of the spies through the land, for they seem to have pierced some way into its interior, lasted forty days. At the end of that time they returned. On their way, in one of the glens where fruit and flower grew tangled in the very lap of plenty, they stopped to gather some pomegranates and figs, and to cut down a bunch of grapes. It was by the banks of a brook called the brook of Eshcol : and by this simple deed

making the spot, as by a solitary footprint, sacred and famous to all time, the band then issued from the shade of Canaan, and pursued their track back to the camp in Kadesh. We can easily understand the welcome, half curiosity, half fear, that awaited them, and with what an escort they passed up the valley to the presence of Moses. First they shewed the ripe luscious grapes that, to keep them unspoiled, they had carried between two slung upon a bough, and they, without concealment, described the abundance and the beauty of the land ; but, in the same breath, eight out of the ten told the terror they had felt at the cities on the hill-ridges, great and high and walled up to heaven, how the country swarmed in all directions with the fiercest races, and how especially the sons of Anak, giants in stature, and the offspring of giants, had been seen by them, making them feel as grasshoppers at the sight, and that the whole project of the Israelites to invade such a land would prove, if tried, defeat and ruin.

While they thus spoke, a thrill ran through the listening crowds, which, for a moment, Caleb, one of the two hitherto silent spies, stilled by raising his voice and exclaiming, if they would but go forward boldly in the way of God, they would easily, spite of all that had been said, possess the land. But the false-hearted eight, made resolute in their tale by the sympathetic panic it had moved, repeated it in yet stronger colour, and straightway, with all that impulse of blind-



ness and abjectness with which the Israelite story so often amazes and repels us, a wail ran throughout the congregation ; the people, we are told, wept that night ; and then, passing from grief to rage, as though by this long, bootless circuit out of Egypt, they had been at last deceived to their shame and ruin, they clamoured to depose Moses and Aaron from the lead, and that they should themselves choose a captain who would guide them back to Egypt. In the face of this wild and worst mutiny there had been, Joshua and Caleb, the two spies faithful among the faithless, rent their clothes and made a vehement appeal ; they denied not there were difficulties in the way,—that Canaan would be won only by warfare and conquest ; but they exclaimed it would amply repay the effort ; and as for the strength of cities and of men,—Israel had God upon her side, and these adversaries, strong as they were, would, in such a case, perish before her. Never, in short, was it a moment like the present, when it was win all or lose all with Israel. But the tumult scarce gave ear ; instead of that the people took up stones to stone the two daring hinderers of their panic to death.

In this critical moment the glory of the Lord appeared in the eyes of the whole congregation, breaking forth as though the tabernacle were on flame ; and, turning from the no doubt silenced and abashed multitude, Moses hastened into the awful Presence. Once

more divine wrath was waxing to the very brink of Israel's destruction ; and in plain phrase God told His servant He would sweep the people with a pestilence, and instate him and his family in their room. But the unflinching fidelity of Moses to his great mission, tried thus again, failed him not a second. He threw himself before God, and poured out an entreaty that He would deal not so with His people,—not because they deserved other—but in truth deserved the very worst at the hand of Heaven ; but God was pledged to redeem them to the last ; the divine name and power and faithfulness were all, in face of the heathen world, embarked in this cause of bringing the Israelites into the Promised Land ; and for that reason alone the task, desperate as it seemed, must be achieved. Not one spot of calumny or reflection must ever rest upon the pure raiment of God's word and promise. It is strange to read this passage—as if the earthly creature were more prompt and clear-sighted than the dread and blessed Creator : but it is one of those passages in which the truer meaning is, that God seized the occasion to evoke the noble graces He himself had planted in His servant's character and heart—Himself retiring back into imperfect shadow, as it were, that these graces, as in the prayer and fervour of Moses, might stand more luminously forth. Accordingly, the mighty God, after this manner, is seen as if convinced by the human reasoning, and bowing Himself to the human entreaty. He

would spare the people for the present, He said. He would not abate Him of His purpose to give Israel the good land. But while mercy was to triumph, judgment also must, after these outrageous events, have its witness; and therefore though the covenant God had sworn to would stand, He doomed that the then pilgrim generation should have no share therein. They had filled the cup of their provocations full; and now, instead of giving them these Canaan ridges within sight, He would turn them back into the wilderness. He would keep them wandering there till every one of them then living, from twenty years old and upwards, should die. Forty years would He imprison them thus in the desert wastes; and only when—Joshua and Caleb alone excepted—the last grave should be dug, and the last of the rebel thousands laid in its dust, would He bring Israel into rest.

There was no gainsaying, even by the zealous Moses, this terrible, but righteous, sentence; and, as if already to bring home its bitter first-fruits, God smote the eight slanderous spies then and there with a plague that they died. The stroke must have recalled the people to a sense once more of Him with whom they had to do. And when Moses added to their rising fears, by sadly telling them what now were God's purposes—that to them the land had been a few hours before such that all conquests of it were possible, *now* impossible—touched and tasted by them, but never to

be grasped—seen, but for ever lost,—there was a rapid passing back from one passionate extreme to another ; so that now, stung with remorse, they mourned greatly. *Was* it true that all had hung upon the balance of a moment, and that moment, allowed by them to slip, was irretrievable ; that what might have been yesterday could not now be to-day ; that the prize, so within their grasp, and still hanging there before them, could no more be reached now for ever ? It seemed to them incredible ; and blind in their despair the one way as they had been in the other—spurred as men are who have lost some signal opportunity, and who, instead of drawing themselves back, collecting their force, and waiting patiently for the opportunity to come again, dash recklessly and excitedly after what is lost, as though passion, all off its guard, would be likely to achieve that which coolness and deliberateness at the right moment might have done but did not ;—spurred in such manner, I say, the Israelites would not believe their one great chance gone ; they exclaimed they would yet retrieve it ; and, in the teeth of Moses' remonstrance, and the fact—that should have been enough—that the cloud of God's presence stirred not off its spot to be their guide, they hurried tumultuously by the hill-route into the region of the Amalekites lying northward. What now, compared with the loss that threatened them, was the stature of the giants or the *fencing* of the cities they had yesterday so feared ? But,

alas ! it was too late. The Amalekites met them in disorder and exhaustion ; and in the shame of defeat, as they were driven back to Kadesh, they were taught bitterly—oh how bitterly !—how great their sin of halting just upon the brink,—how precious beyond count the moment they had refused and lost,—and how, God himself now standing in the way, the prize they might have snatched could be redeemed no more !

The whole blindness of the unhappy people lay in this—that they believed their own conjured-up shadows more than they did the simple, plainly-seen realities of God. Two things were set before them on the spies' return—here, in ripe blood-red grapes, tangible assurance of the land, first-fruits of that which, according to divine promise, flowed with milk and honey—and these were the realities of God ; there, on the other hand, a report of giant adversaries to be fought, and cities walled up to heaven to be taken—and these, though having undoubtedly some foundation in fact, were the absurdly exaggerated shadows of human fear. The Israelites dropped sight altogether of the former, and turned with dilated gaze only to the dark proportions of the latter. Had they done as the clear-sighted Joshua and Caleb urged them—confessed there *was* something in the Anaks and the walled cities needing courage and conquest, but not more than one right manly effort, specially of a God-led people, was equal to—had they, in short, reduced the human shadows down

to their true dimensions,—then fastened their eyes on these first-fruit grapes, and seen in them omens of the glorious land, and given way to the swelling in their heart of that desire to win it the unworthiest of them did really cherish,—had they weighed matters thus, and girt their loins up, and gone swiftly forward, there is no question but, in one good stroke, Canaan would have been theirs. But the terrors of the way, looming and expanding in their imaginations, they allowed to outweigh and darken God's plain pledges, although these pledges lay at their very feet; and dearly though they coveted the Canaan home, in these terrors they lost its sight,—it was offered them, a splendid chance, but they were so fear-enwrapped it moved them not—they shrank from its possession—and for that reason, victims of their own exaggerations, they were turned back into the wilderness, to linger hopelessly and to die.

So we get at the root of many sad defections in the Christian faith as well. What a scope of grace and privilege and rejoicing and advancement in the life of God is often refused by us, although within reach and sight, just because some dark spectres or other, more or less the creatures of our own fancy, rise up perpetually and intervene. One man, for example, cannot make up his mind to a religious life led on a higher platform than the average, because he dreads the face of that society he mixes in, and to whose tone

and maxims he is bound hand and foot. Another dares not, because life in Christ, he foresees, would demand from him the sacrifice of tastes and habits and modes of existence in the world whose loss he could not bear. Another dares not, because the strain would be too high and constant—life in Christ too unearthly—he could not keep his bow bent always at that awful tension. And so on, for the Anaks and the fenced cities withstanding us, as we suppose, are legion. And in consequence there ensues that sorrowful spectacle of so many one would conclude in the path to Zion, who yet linger afar, and on the same outskirting spots near God's kingdom year by year—the privileges and life of the good land in sight—their eyes desiring, and their speech telling you they *wish* they were such men as God's saints have been, and were clad in such spotless garments as the holy of the earth have worn—yet without courage to make real claims for themselves, to cross the frontier, to possess what God holds out as free to them as ever He made proffer to the highest of His saints: they fear the obstacles between, and in their fancy give them such a bulk that, like the Israelites, their own shadows are always sweeping on God's light—the Anaks and the walled cities are always more to them than the grapes of Eshcol—and all their lifetime they keep wandering in the desert, looking wistfully towards that land very far off, that might, if they had but heart for it, be very nigh. We

cannot but all have had experience, greater or less, of this unhappy chapter of spiritual life in ourselves. We long, yet we dare not. We extend the hand, but we grasp not. We make movement upwards, but we sink again. As does the poor fettered bird flying up to the height of the cord that binds it; it is for the moment in a keen delight, and sings, and has its eye on the free heaven; but the sudden check, alas, is given, both to song and flight, and back it is brought fluttering to the earth. So we, in some earnest season, feel an impulse as from God, and we set the gaze to go over and possess His good land; but the entanglements on this earthly side are too strongly warped, and, ere we go far, they check us, and the impulse dies.

What, my reader, can there be for an escaping from this mournful fate, but to invert the Israelite mistake? *They* looked at the barriers between them and Canaan till their proportions far outgrew the reality, and in their shadow the foretastes God had given of the land were lost. Suppose *we* look at the ripe grapes, and at the light of beauty on the land which tells us it does flow with milk and honey, till the barrier of the giants and the fenced cities is, in turn, comparatively lost. Not that we would underrate the real obstacles there are between us and the gains of God's kingdom. We are warned that to live the life of Christ in the world is a race—a battle—a continual strain, needing effort on effort, conquest on conquest. But then the prin-



ciple is, to set, as the crown over all these, the unutterable prize—and, with eyes fixed on that, and heart going forth passionately after that, to press forward in such wise, as that we shall count our worst battle in the way, in comparison, not worthy of a fear—the worst stroke of the adversary we shall feel falling on us light as dust. Such was the ardent energy of Joshua and Caleb; they by no means despised the giants and their strong cities, but they thought most of God's pledges given them, and the land so glorious and so near, and they were ready, in the confidence of God, to scatter all the strength of every enemy like chaff. Such, too, was Paul's secret, when he set eye on the glittering prize held out to him in Christ, and, for its sake, forgot the things that were behind and pressed on to those that were before, towards that prize,—when again he spoke of the light affliction which was but for a moment, (bitter really and deep-piercing it was,) but not to be compared with the glory that should be revealed, —when again he urged all Christian competitors, like himself, to let their whole soul fasten not on the difficulties of the path, but on the splendid goal, and then “so to run, that they might obtain,”—and when, finally, he bade the sufferers of the Lord in this world to “lay aside every weight, and the sin that more easily beset them, and to run their race with patience,” the charm that lured them on, that sank all else to nothing, that shook all hindrances and enemies aside, being the

“looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of their faith.”

Such must be our secret yet. Instead of looking at the ills and adversaries round us, whose number and whose stature are at least made always tenfold in our fears, we must look at the pledges and the first-fruits of grace, of blessing, of God's Spirit, given us day by day a hundred times over ; oh, we must look, in the face of Christ, at God Himself ! It was the saving of Peter in the waves, when he walked at his own request to Jesus, that, after for a moment, as he had looked down on the heaving billow, and his feet then sank, and his heart died within him, he upraised his eyes again to the mighty Lord, crying, “Save me, I perish !” and the peril instantly was gone. It was the victory, too, of him we read of in the old tale, as he approached the golden house,—the gate was beset with a host of terrors, and had he considered these only, he should have recoiled without hope,—but on the battlements above walked saints gloriously attired and beautiful, and offering him like reward ; and his whole soul settling itself on these, he set down his name at once, fought a stout conflict, and won his way. So, if we look up in the sunshine, we shall never then think of turning our backs, or so much as turning aslant, to see our own shadows. If we fill the eye and the soul with Christ, we shall have room for nought else ; all the evil shadows, flung from self and from the world in such

abundance, will vanish ; all that flesh can do unto us will wane to nothing ! Should the heaviest weight of fear or sorrow settle on us, we can always have recourse to the thick-strewn mercies of our Lord, to His word of promise, to His holy ordinances, to the first-fruits of His Spirit, to the gleams yonder of the good land, to the gathered grapes He already brings from it to our feet—we can always betake ourselves to these—and, as the soul satisfies itself in them, and rises in a brighter and grander encouragement than ever, we can exclaim —“ If God be for us, who can be against us ? ” “ I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord ! ”

Has not this triumph come from the lips of long sickness,—has it not been breathed from the lips of death ? And surely nothing but the heart-ardour, going out always to the coming Jesus and the heaven, the good land, He is to bring, *can* sustain us at the point of real superiority to all our foes. Nothing but such heart-ardour can give power and earnestness to any of our drawings nigh to God,—can wrench us from the network of self and earth,—can seize for us those many golden hours of spiritual opportunity we timorously, and, to our own incalculable loss, let slip,—can redeem us from that sorrowful inanimateness, that

wilderness wandering, that lethargy of years' and years arrested graces, into which so many, by their shrinking back from God's call, have been doomed,—and can save us, above all, and at last, from that curse that fell on the Israelites—the gateway of God opened to them, but unentered—the good land seen, but lost !

CHAPTER XXIII.

*Between the Dead and the Living.*

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THE sullen temper bred by their great disappointment was now, in the Israelites at Kadesh, like a smouldering fire which any chance breath might blow into flame—like a latent disease any chance touch might develop into virulence. So the formidable rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, is the next scene we light on. Korah was an ambitious Levite, jealous of the supremacy of Moses and Aaron, and now passionately bent on having them supplanted ; the others were of the tribe of Reuben, eldest of the tribes of Israel ; and Korah had likely wrought upon them by the proposal of a popular appeal that would engage the whole camp in their favour, overturn the two brothers, and, by a new order, restore Reuben to its rightful place. Accordingly, with this cunning bait appended to it, the conspiracy ran through the people deep and wide.

The instant it came to light, and its insolent voice was heard accusing Moses both of presumption and of failure, the latter proposed God should be umpire. Korah did not shrink from the ordeal, nor in spirit did Dathan and Abiram ; but the latter two openly refused to heed the authority of Moses in any way, and sent

him a reply of scorn from their tents. The deeply-moved heart that had endured so much for Israel could scarce bear more. Moses prayed God therefore now to let loose His arm. So, on the morrow, the people were ranged before the tabernacle. If still in the valley of Petra, the scene must have been beyond description grand—first, the swarms moving in the low ground, then the scattered groups set on every shelf of the purple cliffs round, and in the heart of all, on some well-seen platform, the tabernacle of God, Moses standing pallid and lofty at its front altar, and the two hundred and fifty of the company of Korah advancing on the holy space, each his brazen censer in his hand, and for the trial before God. Korah seems to have lost no confidence; he had based his plot on the plea that any man in the congregation was as holy as its two leaders—that is, with an unscrupulous artfulness and success the world has often in like cases seen since, he had roused and won to his side the popular feeling; and as he emerged on the clear ground before Moses, the whole massed camp was as if drawn in a dense ring behind him. The glory of the Lord at that moment rested on His servants, and a voice bade them stand aside, that the whole wedged mass before them might be consumed. But Moses in his quick self-forgetfulness interposed,—were the people not but mere victims of their own ignorance and folly, and would the sin of the one man who had misled them bring death on all?



Wherefore God, so far relenting, commanded as the next thing a line of separation round the conspirators and their tents, that, in that doomed circle, *they* at least should perish. Moses could not but obey this second voice; and crying so earnestly to the people that with an instinct of fear they fell back at once—the tent of Korah, which, as that of a Levite, was near the tabernacle, and the tents of Dathan and Abiram, which, as those of the next leading tribe in Israel, were pitched close behind it, stood awfully isolated before the multitude, and before God. Dathan and Abiram, all they and theirs, were in their tents—some, as if contemptuously, standing in the tent doors; Korah and his two hundred and fifty accomplices bringing with them censers, very likely by this time in a dark uncertainty, at the sanctuary threshold—when Moses, in a loud voice, brought the test of God to bear. If his rule was not from heaven, these within the tents would die common deaths; if from heaven, the earth would open then and there beneath them, and be their grave. Scarce had he spoken the word when the ground yawned asunder—tents, men, women, children, as in a flash of pale horror, were engulfed; and the thrill and cry that ran round the vale and cliffs told the judgment of the Lord was done. Following hard on this pitiless sweep, fire darted on the two hundred and fifty who would have broken the fences of the priesthood, and they, too, perished as they stood. Only their brazen censers

were upcaught amidst the flames, and beat into plates for an altar covering, that Israel, coming daily to its worship and beholding that memorial, might forget God's visitation never.

So Korah and his company were repressed into sudden nothingness. Yet even so terrible a lesson did not at the hour come home—the mutinous cause had taken too fast hold in the popular heart; and after brooding in the darkness of the tents all night, the people next morning began afresh to turn upon the brothers, crying, as their crowds moved and seethed uneasily about, that they had been the slayers of the Lord's people. Moses and Aaron fled as before into the shelter of God's presence; and as they stood there and the murmur deepened through the host, this time the anger of the Most High could *not* be held back. While His two servants fell upon their faces, He let loose in the valley a pestilence of death. Moses, with all his acute instincts, felt it was abroad, and, instantly recovered to his old sublime stand of mediation, he exclaimed to Aaron that he should delay not a moment, but snatching the fire of God off the altar into his censer, should rush into the breach between the dead and the living, and, by that incense of atonement, stay the plague. Aaron hurried to obey. He bore the swinging vessel, flaming and smoking, in his hand—he ran through the affrighted multitude—he found the pathway of the plague as it came on, mowing down as

with an unseen scythe its thousands ; and there, where the stark corpses lay, and the sweep of death was still advancing, he set his feet—his priestly figure in its robes of sacredness faced the destroyer—he waved his heaven-lit censer in atoning power before God—he stood between the dead and the living ; and the plague was stayed !

Peace then, and almost literally the peace of death, fell on the valley. It had been at a heavy cost Israël had ever lent ear to the arts of Korah, as must have bitterly been felt while the thousands that had died plague-stricken were being buried in the earth, and cairns raised on their graves. Wherefore, to imprint this page of events in such wise on the Israelite heart that, in the direction of the Aaronic priesthood at least, it should rebel no more, God directed the well-known competition of the almond rods, each tribe furnishing a rod, and all being laid up within the sanctuary. When the group was unveiled upon the morrow, Aaron's rod alone was found to have budded and blossomed and yielded almonds ; and the sign was such that the tribes yielded the Levite supremacy for ever, and each departed to his own, hushed in soul, and these late events casting on him, as it were, the repressive hand of death.

Passing other points in this tragic page, it cannot but arrest us, how sublime the attitude, not of Moses, for it was no strange thing for Moses to place himself

in the most desperate breach, but of the less heroic Aaron, as, rising to the occasion, he asserted the glory of his priesthood—his feet set, his censer waved, between the dead and the living, so that the plague was stayed. Was it not in shadow the attitude of Him Who has since come into the world to seek and to save that which was lost—Whose bleeding feet were planted in the very tide-way of sin and death—the incense of Whose life, poured out upon the cross, broke the sweep of these destroyers for ever—Whose place even now, where He intercedes for us, is a place of arresting power, whereby He holds His people safe folded within the circle of life on the one side, and on the other sets their dread enemies, death and hell, at bay, till finally He shall destroy them, and cast them into the lake of fire for ever?

Was it not also in type the very attitude that has been taken by all true ministers in the Church of Christ, who have been consumed as with a passion for saving souls,—who have counted no sacrifice too great—not life itself—if by any possibility they might save some,—who, in their fervour, and their pity, and their fearlessness, have been everywhere that door would open to them, bearing with them “the fulness of the blessing of the gospel,” snatching prey from Satan unto God, and not even in the worst depths shrinking from conflict with the destroyer, but there “saving with fear, pulling out of the fire?”

Was it not also the attitude in which those strike us as standing who have been raised up by God to reawaken the Church and the world to His truth,—who have shaken the dust of ages of corruption from His holy Word,—who have struck off the deadening appendages of men, whereby, as with poisonous creepers, spiritual life and gospel truth again and again have been overrun and well-nigh destroyed,—who at all hazards have freed the living from the dead, and given it in its simple gleaming beauty again, like a new and glorious birth, to the world?

Was it not also in figure that attitude daily taken in our own hearts by the Holy Spirit,—carrying on His mysterious but effectual work—parting us, so to speak, from our former selves—rearing up the heavenly, quenching the earthly—cherishing the living grace, staying the stealthy infection that comes even from the relics of dead sin,—in a word, making us “new creatures in Christ Jesus; old things passing away; all things becoming new?” Yea, to that extent does the ever-vigilant Spirit of God carry this working out of salvation in us, standing on the line between the dead and the living—that, at whatever cost, the portions in us plague-smitten beyond rescue must be, and are, lopped away, if only at last the life be saved. Hence the dire experience of those for whom a thrice-heated crucible is ordained, as their only pathway back to God; and hence the searchingness of Christ’s saying,

that, if even the right eye and the right hand be the offending members, better to have the one plucked out and the other cut off—better to enter heaven blind and maimed—than, retaining all, to be cast into hell-fire.

And, finally, was Aaron's stand between the dead and the living not in figure that attitude ordained for all who, in the desert way, are following Jesus? By our very part with Him, we are more consecrated than was even Aaron; for we are "kings and priests unto the Father through His blood." What, then, is involved in that, but that we put our awful consecration to the test; that, seeing each day and scene we pass through, there are ever these two elements at war—the kingdom of God's grace and the kingdom of the wicked one—the living and the dead,—the latter often advancing, too, upon the former, subtly, like the footsteps of a plague,—what follows for us but that, in our heaven-pledged character, we slay the evil and throw shelter on the good,—we bear the help of Christ where we can—we strike in to ease pain, to raise the fallen, to give strength to the tempted, comfort to the sorrowful, light, as a censer lamp, borne from the Cross, to the dying? Thousands, it is true, have but a faint sense of obligation thus, or lack it altogether. Yet sure I am that, were the veil of life around us stripped off, and we saw the ravages of the destroyer—the unutterable human miseries—the slain souls—the souls, still more numerous, palpitating a near prey,

upon the brink,—not the poorest Christian conscience but would spring alive with the promptitude and self-abandonment of Aaron, and in Christ's name stand between the dead and the living, that the plague might be stayed. And so much do I hold it to be a part of God's meaning for us that the place and attitude of Aaron be our pattern, that I believe a second consecration is put on some—even that of passing through the scourging of affliction—to fit them for the work. For, speaking comfort out of an untried heart, I *may* chance to touch faintly the right key in the broken heart to which I come; but, tried and searched myself, I enter then with perfect certainty into its very depths—I stand between its dead and its living, and I help to stay its plague. Untried myself, I know only as a muffled sound the deeper voice of God's Word; tried, that Word rings like a clear bell upon my ear, and in all its emphasis and power I can then arrest thought, and raise hope, and quell the adversary, in the hearts of others. In short, untried, I am only so far qualified, if I may use the illustration, as were the magic rods of the Egyptian enchanter, that could work their wonders to a certain point—but, heated, tempered, moulded, in the affliction fires of God, I become as the rod of Aaron, that, instinct with its divine magnetism, wrought charms far beyond all the others, and by which it was declared to be the channel of the power of God. What a meaning, then, to the awful sorrows in some

lives—what a meaning to the poorest and the weakest God has thrust aside upon his bed! It is the second baptism of heaven. It is that you be made fully fraught with holy preparation—that you may be anointed with a grace beyond the common run—that you may be charged with the intensity and reality of that spirit, that, even in your simplest word, will give you wondrous power with others,—it is that, in a plague-stricken world, whether you are destined yet for high place and work, or even for a sick-bed's feebleness to the very end, you may make it felt—the lightest syllable as well as the most eminent deed in God's service always making it felt, the one as the other,—that you have that priestliness upon you, whereby you stand between the dead and the living, and stay the plague. Who would not glory in infirmities for such a sake—that the power of God might rest upon him—that he might swing his heaven-kindled censer, however feebly, yet in Christ's steps, and after Christ's own manner—that, in face of an incredulous world, he might be one of those who shew that this profession which we make of following Him is not a fiction, but that there is a reality, a depth, a devotedness, an energy of life abroad amongst us, which is *felt* to be unearthly—which in no way is found explainable, but that, like the sublime vehemence of Aaron, it is the baptism of the Holy Ghost and of fire!



CHAPTER XXIV.

*Thirty-Seven Years' Silence.*



JUST at this point in the wilderness story there is a silent step over a space of no less than thirty-seven years. Of these years we have no record save the shadowy outline in the catalogue of wilderness stations preserved in Numbers, and of which about fifteen seem assignable to this long narrativeless gap. Probably the Israelites went scattered, not in a mass, but in groups, as they could find pasture and other settlement about the desert; and thus broken may have had binding them a desultory kind of intercourse only, till the limit fixed by God's judgment had expired, and the march-trumpet again summoned to the great meeting-ground at Kadesh.

Be that as it may, it is striking surely to reflect on that silent interval of years. We know what changes thirty-seven years' lapse would bring about in our modern day; and although in Oriental life time marks its channel far less vehemently, yet there, too, the long space of Israel's dispersion could not be without its tokens of a deep human interest. Egypt was a far way in the past—even the scenes of the Red Sea and Sinai had receded. Who could say his manhood had been

spent in the brick-making of Goshen? Fewer and fewer every day. Gradually chief after chief fell, tribe after tribe was thinned, till among those who now composed the thousands of Israel, and who had all been striplings under twenty years of age at the escape from Egypt, Moses only and a few more saw themselves, white-haired veterans, standing out in the throng, like a clump of giant trees, hoary landmarks of an old forest, rising amidst the thick umbrage and the lithe stems of a younger growth. Yet the manifest end of God's judgment was in the space we speak of undoubtedly wrought out; and that is what we take to be really the story of the time. Partly that end was—to weed away all the lives that had been born and bred in the air of Egyptian grossness, which, so far as concerned the grown manhood of Israel, was done—although, like a tenacious poison-root, there remained always some ineradicable fibre of Egyptian idolatry, and of the strange spell of Egyptian life, in Israel's heart;—and partly God's end had been, by the slow stretch of desert existence, to teach the new generation hardy desert habits,—to put that courage in them the slave spirit of their fathers had always shrank from rising to,—to prepare them by a long and total homelessness among the wastes for a real ardent zest in being led once more towards the good land,—and so to pave their last year's pathway as one of continuousness and victory. Hence God's long and silent patience, even while His people

seemed to drop in the wilderness as the autumn leaves drop—sadly, and one by one; it was a blank silence in the eyes of men, but a record every moment of breathing interest before Him in heaven.

So, for wise results, God has often favoured such silent spaces as these thirty-seven years. If we may touch on the instance reverently, our Lord Himself in His earthly history was an eminent illustration. Not for a moment that there was needed any interval whatever to mould or change that life that was perfect in Him as a crystal sun-ray from the beginning; but it is matter of record that its first thirty years were those of nearly absolute silence—that the comparison between these thirty years' silence and the three years' brief condensed action which succeeded is most startling when we think of it. And we dare not, therefore, say how far that long voiceless preface—perhaps in a degree the favourite portion in the eye of God and the holy angels—how far it may not have been, even with the all-holy Jesus, needed—how much feeling round was necessary, as if half-shrinkingly, ere the divine growth struck its roots into our cold earthly soil—ere it sent out its delicate shoots, sensitive to each breath, yet adapting themselves gradually to live and expand in our cold earthly clime—ere at last it emerged wholly from the sheath of silence, and was seen the one peerless flower of all human life—"the chiefest among ten thousand, and altogether lovely." "Yet learned He

obedience by the things which He suffered," it is said of Christ. Was that wondrous tuition not done as much in the mute thirty years of Nazareth as in the three years after, which had their cruel ending on the Cross? Were the three years not but the open supplement to the sealed volume of the thirty years before, wherein, in the awful secrecy of Himself and His beloved Son, God had traced line by line those fairest graces, in whose revealing to the world He was afterwards "well-pleased?"

Moses, too, in his own history, had been a marked example of successive stages when the life was silent; first, in the forty years of Pharaoh's palace; and still more in the forty years when he was the shepherd of Jethro's flocks in the solitudes of the Horeb desert; when it seemed as though his manhood were running all to waste, and the purposeless life should have a memory and a grave without a name. But how the reined-in muteness of these years, and years so melancholy in their passage, sent out in the end a noble outgrowth of service, and of rapid crowded action in the cause of God, these stages of the desert journey we have been tracking tell.

So the curb of silence has been laid repeatedly upon the Church. Often, too, for whole generations—till the life of God's kingdom has appeared as if it had ebbed into utter dormancy for ever. But it has not been

that God has either abandoned or neglected His own : on the contrary, the intervals of a human inaction have been those in which He has been busiest winnowing His Church behind the veil—fusing some chosen hearts here and there in His heavenly moulds—and so anointing, and preparing, and intensifying, His kingdom anew in the earth, that, when the signal has been given, the vast garments of torpidity and decay have been flung off, and the revived Church has come forth “ fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners.”

With our own lives also the retreat of silence is not unfrequently the rule of God's working. Who shall say that the silence is not better than the stage of fevered action? We may pine under its tedium, and especially so if it be far protracted, and we get to drink withal the cup of privation and of pain. But I cannot help thinking every heart intently studious of the leadings of God's hand must feel soon or late, that to be thrown back off the lighted stage of action into the eclipse of silence is to be thrown back into the more secret laboratories of grace, where God the Spirit sheds His noiseless, but rarer imprints—weeds away one by one the nerves of sin and death—binds one by one the gleaming threads of holiness and life,—prepares, subdues, chastens, makes way through the whole soul in persistent action, till the last dark spot

is gone, and the soul is one shrine of light. And that this process often should be long we wonder not, for, as in providence, so in such exercise of grace as this,

“The mill of God grinds slowly,  
But it grinds exceeding small.”

So you catch a glimpse, surely, of what makes the shadow of your silent time, although a mere blankness in the sight of men, a hidden brightness in the sight of God,—a mere blind monotony the world passes or shakes its head in pity at without, but a drama of intensest interest within, off which the Refiner's eye, or hand, is lifted not day nor night. It is something I would compare only to the building of Solomon's temple, which, we are told, rose without sound of axe or hammer heard ; as we may conceive it, the tracery of dark and muffled scaffolding hiding it round, and making it even hideous to the outside beholders,—dumb, too, the workmanship that went on within ; till the silent task was done ; and then the blind scaffold garniture was stripped away, and the fair creation in its dazzling glories was revealed. So, if you are reserved yet for an active part in God's cause in the world, here is the meaning of your silent prison-house now. The world hears not, sees not, what is going on ; but in the day of God's will He will snatch the veil off and reveal what has been His hidden working in your heart—new faith, daringness, elevation, humility, earnestness,



purity as of a child, love as of heaven. Or, if you are doomed not in this earth to have the bands of silence loosed ; if, as you may be lingering in trial and patience now, you are doomed to go on lingering and shrouded to the end,—oh, be not discouraged, as though God had forgotten to be gracious—hold thyself *still* in Him—He is purifying every pulse-stream—He is toning every pulse-beat in the dejected soul—He is preparing thee for the good land,—and marvellous, even to thyself, when His summons comes at last to go over thither, will be the snatching-off of the scaffolding of pain and silence, and the weariness of days and years, when thou wilt stand a living temple of His grace and glory in the heavens, when thou wilt prove His unbaffled work to all, and wilt exclaim, as did the psalmist, “Though I have lien among the pots, yet am I as the wings of a dove covered with silver, and her feathers with yellow gold !”



CHAPTER XXV.

*The Unadvised Tips.*

reluctance abandoned, to the rock-bound fastness, and the grim cliffs round Kadesh, and the shadeless blaze poured on them from the sun overhead. But the popular outbreak was nevertheless like the waste and baffling of whole thirty-seven years' lesson—it was a dashing of the single cherished hope Moses had reposed on in his heart; and in his grief and anger,—anger mounting higher than the grief,—he was betrayed into the one celebrated sin, which broke the charm of his hitherto faultless way—broke the wand of his leadership in Israel—and doomed even him to die before the entrance into the good land. He sought, indeed, as was his wont, to obey God; he inquired on the tabernacle ground how the people's outcry was to be met; and when told to take his rod as formerly, and with Aaron to assemble the congregation, and, before their eyes, to address the dead rock, and water would leap forth, he had prepared to do this solemn part; the host's countless eyes, gleaming out thirst and eagerness, were on him, and in front of the chosen rock—one probably conspicuous in the chasm-like valley—he had planted himself and upraised his arm; but then it was the human passion mingled with the divine deed, and swelled to overflow—the lips that never hitherto had spoken but fittingly gave way to the unadvised burst, “Hear now, ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock?” At the two strokes which followed, it is true, the gush came—the valley ran for the thirsty

multitude like a flooded river ; but, although unnoted perhaps, or noted by few, how fallen from his high estate stood Moses there within the shadow, passion fading in him, shame and sadness settling on him, as of a long, long life of upheld consecration broken in a moment's whirl—and God speaking with his conscience, and declaring to him that, for this failure to set forth His honour in the people's eyes, he should have *his* part in the conquest of the good land reft away. Aaron had been partner in the sin, and a like doom of death in the wilderness should fall on him.

How sorrowful the change on the aspect of the great mediator of Israel ! If ever man had been chastened to the purest life in the path of God, he had been. He had been faithful in all God's house. He had on frequent occasions stood on almost terms of sublime level with God ; and the wisdom, and the love, and the pure-hearted pleadings he had uttered, had been justified of heaven. We should have thought, therefore, that, about and within the fabric of so tried, watchful, sanctified a life, the last faintest offspring of sin-born passion would have been destroyed ; but here was a moment, alas ! when even this saint of God was off his guard, and an uncrushed serpent-fang discovered itself living yet, shot out from underneath the life where it had been coiled, and struck all its excellence suddenly to the heart. Instead of the portrait glowing hitherto with all its colours rich from heaven, we have

now the pallidness of one from whom the virtue has gone out—the radiance has been lost. We look at the contrast—the enlarged minister of God one moment, the drooping, shame-stricken penitent the next—and we feel that the purest, truest, strongest, most advanced in God's grace should still walk softly. Even near the end, at the very gate of heaven, never relax in the doing of these words of Christ—"Watch and pray, lest ye enter into temptation!"

Yet, it may be asked, Why so heavy a penalty inflicted for the fault of a mere moment, and especially in such a case as that of one who had served God so rarely and unswervingly till then? We are disposed by our common standard, generally, to judge that one eminent virtue in a man is a set-off against *many* defects; that where, for instance, there has been great heroism, or generous kindness, these throw even bad failings in the same character into shade; nay, that such things as genius, public service, intellectual renown even, elevate a man into such a blaze that his vices behind the brilliance are lost. And much more in the case of a lustrous Christian, who in all things has been adorning the doctrine of God his Saviour, we leap to the conclusion, that the blemish of a passing infirmity against that shining background is nothing; the light of so much goodness otherwise condones it and blots it out. But God's ways are far other than our ways—His thoughts than our thoughts. He in

His searchingness draws out the very opposite conclusion. For *His* rule is, the higher you ascend in attainment and in place within His kingdom, the higher the holiness exacted, the more faultless the steps, and consequently, if there be one moment's fall even, the more unpardonable the sin! A common potter's vessel might be injured without loss, but the slightest crack in the richly-chased vase that is to be a vessel in the Lord's house must be felt to be a loss irreparable. A stone of the valley may be seamed and broken, but the jewel that is being wrought for the setting of God's crown must not have in it the faintest flaw. So judgment begins at the house of God. It is there the rigorous and awful inquisition is the most unrelenting, just because "unto whomsoever much is given," not to him shall any compensating latitude be granted, but "of him shall be much required;" he who walks high in influence and grace must walk the more spotlessly in white; he to whom many eyes are turned, on whose words they wait, by whose example many souls (so helpless are they) are almost literally to live or die—he must hold himself the more utterly from off the earth, and gather to himself increasingly the saintliness of heaven. For God's work he must be holy as God is holy, pure as He is pure. Does it not startle us to think of this judgment not of men but of God? Do we not approve it in our hearts? And considering the grace that has been heaped on grace to us, the high

stand to which many have been lifted in the signal love of God, do we not feel, Christian minister, Christian parent, Christian labourer, Christian pilgrim, that the momentous charge we have obtained is ours,—that it and we can no more be rent asunder—that the rising of our steps hitherto imply a higher rising yet—that room for even infirmity, far less sin or earthliness or folly, must be found less and less with us—that we must daily, hourly, embrace our gift from God with such a trembling memory of Moses's sin, as that we shall count one fleck of evil, so much as one hasty word, or light deed, or moment's anger on the brow, what would undo all and destroy it to the heart. Here surely is our perpetual prayer, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!"



CHAPTER XXVI.

*The Mountain Pier.*



LOOKING from the watch-towers round Kadesh, there was one broad beaten highway penetrating through the hills of Edom, by which Israel saw an access to the good land straight and easy. That is, after their passage that way, and across the long slopes of Mount Seir beyond, they would stand on the eastern heights lining the Jordan, and with the fields of Canaan map-like at their feet. It was strongly tempting, therefore, to conciliate the fierce hunting tribes of Edom, descendants of that famous kinsman of their own race, Esau ; and accordingly with every soft solicitation the Edomites were besought to allow them to pass through, and simply to pass through, the gateway of their hills. But these wild rovers of the desert would have none of the proposal ; and the Israelites, not choosing to make their passage one of battle and slaughter, turned aside by the way of Hor, that, as God directed, they might fetch a circuit round Edom, far and painful indeed, but yet better so, since it would be a path bloodless and free.

But at their very first halting-place, on Hor, one of those two great figures that for forty years had stood

in the van of Israel fell at last. Change and death had smitten the face of all the host ; change and death were now to strike these last and greatest two also. Moses, indeed, would still be spared a few marches further, but Aaron's sand-glass was here spent, and on Mount Hor he was destined to die. It was in a manner simple, yet beyond words sublime. By the Lord's bidding, only the brothers, with Eleazer, Aaron's eldest son, were to climb the upper pinnacle of the mountain—the people were to stand over against, upon a lower ridge, from the sort of table-land of which the high rocky crest above, appointed to be Aaron's deathbed, has its rise. We can almost set the scene before us in the glorious ruddiness of morning, as the tribes, in their awe and sadness, hastened up out of all the valleys, till the broad height they were to occupy was black with the concourse, and every breath was held, and every eye was fastened on the sacred three, as, passing line after line, they emerged beyond the crowd, and, parting from its hum and its living touch, began to scale the rocky way. Their figures were seen in and out among the cliffs as they went ; now pausing, as if to take another farewell look of the watching multitude ; again resting, as if the aged brothers were recounting to one another the long burden they had borne together,—one to bear it yet a little while, the other to bear it now no more for ever ; and finally rising clear upon the hill-top, their forms

set against the sky, and with all the desert realm cast beneath their feet. It must, in truth, have been to Aaron a striking yet a dreary moment, when he thus stood on his own couch of death, and, for the last time, let his eye rest on the world around him. Far behind, and southward, were the desert hills and valleys they had traversed for so many years, half hazy, half dazzling, in their whiteness; northward were the dim barriers of Canaan Israel had once faced but recoiled from; eastward were the dark clusters of Edom, with their strange red seams cutting them in manifold places, and one of them, the famous cleft of Kadesh, buried utterly unseen in their breast; while beyond these still lay the regions of Seir, fading away into the horizon's mist. There was no break for Aaron, even of a lattice-width, through which he might see one solitary shoot of sunshine resting anywhere upon the good land. This was his Pisgah view; but how different far from that of Moses that was to be—like what had been the difference in their lives in nearness and constancy to God. The dying gaze of Moses was to be filled with the land, lighted and glorious to its utmost stretch: the dying gaze of Aaron was filled with a picture of desert dreariness, and the land in its far-off, veil was shut away as much as had it been the veil of night.

Touching, too, it was when, from the prospect, the aged high priest turned that his brother might strip

him of the trappings of his state. The action must have been distinctly seen by the ten thousand eyes below ; the flash of the tall mitre as it first was taken off and the white hairs were allowed to stream abroad ; then the broad glitter of the Urim and Thummim as they were lifted from his breast ; then the disrobing of his jewelled dress, and the removing of his priestly staff. True, these were transferred on the very spot to his own son, Eleazar ; neither his name, therefore, nor his office nor his work would perish. Moreover, he had other consolation at the moment, in that his two nearest kinsmen stood beside him, if they might, to help him die,—that is, to go with him to the dark verge : Moses, his brother, he had always in his heart loved and leaned on, and Eleazar, his son, now to be the heir of all his honour. And he was about to die also literally in sight of all the people,—the thousands of Israel below on that vast platform having but one thought and uttering but one prayer, and weeping with but one grief, because their great high priest there on the mountain summit was about to breathe his last. There was something in so grand a spectacle round his bier the easily-impelled nature of Aaron could not but confess. To die on the altar, as it were, of a whole nation's heart, was what might, with any man, bring a flush into the cheek of death.

Nevertheless, spite of these undoubted consolations, it was sadly touching when the moment came. He

was high priest of Israel no more. He was nought now but a bent, disrobed, discrowned, old man. The garments he had just parted with faded before his dim eyes, as though they had lost their beauty. So did the hues of life, the tabernacle service, all the steps of influence and honour he had trodden—everything earthly scenes had been to him must now have waned into a dull and featureless shadow. Even the living faces of Israel turned upward to the cliff, I can conceive, must have flitted away from him like a sea of spectral nothings. Even the hands of Moses and Eleazar, as they laid him on his couch, must, I can conceive, have glided from him afar off. And as he was stretched on his great mountain bed of state, his back upon the cold rock, his white face turned up to the blue of heaven, probably Aaron entered as deep as any man into the pure solitariness of death; all the arrayed fellowships of earth did really help him not; and, within the shadow of his own soul, there crossed him the inextinguishable pang, and the aged heart lay still!

I mean not for a moment that Aaron was without hope in his death; on the contrary, he had not only grown hoar-headed in the service of his God, and, with all his failings, had set forth a life to be reverently cherished in the memory of Israel, but now, in his last hour on Hor, God himself was around the steep, and, no doubt, out of the death-shock He would make His

servant rise a priest in the true blood of atonement on the floor of heaven for ever. But I think there *had* been that degree of failure in the life of Aaron which made the minutes of his parting exceeding sad : no bright view of promise given him without—none, we should suppose, within : only the curtain drawn down, and the mystery of death very dark. Is it not the case that such an end arrives to many who yet have been true and even noted servants of God ? Yet, when it is told them the time of God's will is near and they must die, with what cold sharpness the message comes home ! How it takes the light and colour in a moment out of all earthly existence,—the interests that stimulated but a day before,—the current in whose strength we ran,—the work in whose freshness we were up and doing,—death pales them all, and, like ghosts, they wane from us and vanish. Not that, in one sense, we fear to die. We know the certainties the gospel teaches ; we hold by Him who hath destroyed death, and him that had the power of it ; and, when the strife is over, we have the light and the deliverance beyond. But it is the unreckoned, inextinguishable pang there is between,—it is that hour of sinking when the holds we have sustaining us here drop and can cling to us no more,—when, although the very closest and dearest we love on earth stand beside us, they are powerless,—when, although hundreds of hearts we may have blessed pray for us and weep for us, they avail us not,—when



we sink far into the waste solitude, and the face of love fades, and the voice of love dies,—oh, it is in that shrouded, unpenetrated hour,—that falling alone into the void,—that agony and depth of death, even were it but a moment,—it is there the inextinguishable horror lies! Are there not many, I ask, true servants on the whole of the living God, and having on the whole true faith in what God's gospel word has taught them, who yet cower in their hearts before this misery of death? I think it cannot be denied. And the reason simply is, that, although in one way leading Christian lives, they have not been lives sustained in the highest and most constant closeness of companionship with God,—rather we may have practised very slack and very occasional intercourse with Him and with the world to come. We may never have dreamt of dwelling day by day, hour by hour, in the near blessedness of God, His loving Son, His Holy Spirit. It may have been a tedium and a shrinking to us. The temper and the pursuits of our life may not have been of a sort to bear it. And, instead of having the two paths, that of earth and that of heaven, running so closely parallel in our hearts as that any moment we might step from one into the other, we may have led the earthly into such far and many windings, that only at a point here and there, and only for a few minutes, it has touched the heavenly, when it has glided away quick into the thickets of the world again. Such lives as these cannot but

find a darksome start and misery in death. In the very nature of their case, the good land cannot be in its clear light before them ; they must die rather, as we have pictured Aaron, with the veil heavy upon it, and the soul very solitary in its death ; for how can God be flown to in death as a father would be flown to by a child, since that was not the manner of the life,—how can Christ be otherwise than strange somewhat in death, since He was, for the most part, strange in life,—how can the Holy Spirit breathe with power in death, since He was allowed to breathe only with such feebleness in life ?

Oh, my reader, it is by our own neglect and coldness and unfaithfulness with God while we live that we provide for ourselves that troubled hour, almost of desertion, when we die. And we shall never strip it of its terror, either then or now, but by making the hour of our death the sort of criterion of our life,—living as near God now as we shall desire to be then,—cultivating as real touches on the heavenly state now as we shall count it the simplest possible thing to put forth then,—drawing the presence of the blessed Jesus as entirely into our lot now as we shall need Him and His everlasting arms in the depths then,—running our every day and hour in reference up to God's judgment now as the whole issue of them must be poured out then. Such is what alone we can count making security against the forlornness of death. Nearness and con-

stancy to God in life,—nearness to God in death. That is the rule—and that must be our strength at last. We shall then die, not as Aaron, but as Moses, with the whole land distinct in view,—as the earthly love drops us, the heavenly, without one instant's rupture, solitariness, or dismay, taking us up, and whispering us, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" We shall be like one sailing in his solitary bark down a stream,—to those looking at us from the hither side of earth it will seem as though, at the death-point, the stream narrows, and the rocks draw close above it, and the flood runs into a dark shoot, and between their cleft is swallowed up for ever. But we, who are in the bark of God, see and know different far. The stream *does* narrow and blacken, indeed, in that swift rocky passage-way of death; but as we go down its rapid we can see more than does the spectator on the bank. We can see a light as of day beyond; and while to those we leave behind we vanish in the chasm as if lost, as if nothing could be said about our death but that we have passed and we are not—the heavenward flow to us is never broken,—we are out beneath the gloomy archway, and on that thither side the stream expands, and we are floating on its fair and bounteous wave, and we step ashore upon its banks, and we find we are in the good land,—the shining valley "that flows with milk and honey." Oh, let the prayer of our daily pilgrimage be

what will make each living moment fearless and more fearless yet of death,—what will make the path hourly clearer,—what will make the death-hour itself at last instead of the dark of agony, the very burst of peace—let our ceaseless prayer be—

“Nearer, my God, to Thee,—  
Nearer to Thee!”

So we leave Aaron to his rest. Moses and Eleazar buried him where he died; and when they two came sorrowfully down the hill-path, the wail of the Israelites began, and, bethinking them how the sin of Aaron for which he had been cut off had been *their* sin first, they mourned for him thirty days.

CHAPTER XXVII.

*The Brazen Serpent.*



COURAGE ought to have shone high upon the banners and faces of Israel, as, leaving Hor, they entered on the clear line of their resistless march ; for scarce had they suffered in some of their outposts an ill-advised assault from one of the Canaanite kings, than, praying God to be their help, they turned aside and destroyed him and his cities at a blow. Then the great multitudinous movement swept on. But it was a slow and wide circuit, as we have seen, it was destined to take ; and more particularly, by doubling back upon their old, old track towards the Red Sea, the Israelites were for the time involved again in the great desert of Arabah, and at its boundlessness and desolateness and fruitlessness their soul fainted within them. When was it to end ? Were they to be for ever tantalised, haunting these broad gloomy valleys, in the coldest nook of which hardly one water-drop was found ? Even when the march came out at one of the great valley mouths on the beach of the Akaba sea, and the sheen waters spread their silver sheet out afar, and the shell-strewn sand made a pavement for the feet, marvellous and white as snow—even then the fainting

eyes of the people must have been too weary for the sight, and they poured out their impatience as of old on Moses. Neither was their thirst quenched, neither was their hunger met; and "their souls," as they cried, "loathed this light food," meaning nothing else than the sacred manna—food of God from heaven!

There was a miserable monotony in this perpetual complaint of the Israelites as to food and water, and their having been led out of Egypt into the wilderness to die. It recurs again and again, after all God's visitations, whether of mercy or of judgment—the same burden of the Israelite tale, without one new note to vary it. How weary God's ear must have been through forty years of that monotonous complaint! In the present instance, angry as well as weary, He sent a plague of fiery serpents through the camp—creatures fierce and flame-coloured in their long glittering shapes, as, gliding suddenly from out the earth, they darted hither and thither in their swarm, filling the people with intensest horror, and striking them with their fangs, so that, and even while they fled, many of them died. An instant cry to Moses for mercy broke from every tongue, and at his prayer once more to God deliverance came. But not this time by the immediate staying of the plague and the sweeping back of the serpent brood into the earth. God chose, while He delivered, to put His mercy in a way that should extract from the Israelite life a faith not



hitherto called much into power, that should cast the choice of the deliverance very much on the people themselves, that should call them into co-operation with His working, that, in short, should really prove their hearts, whether there they would trust Him and obey Him or no. Accordingly Moses was bidden make an image in brass of the fiery snake that was the plague and scattering of the camp; and this image, transfixed upon a pole—the deadly creature, so to speak, thrust through and crucified—to upraise in sight of all the people. Whosoever, then, bitten of the serpents, looked straight to that God-appointed device, fixed his eyes steadfastly on it, and in that gaze sent forth his soul, believing there for him in emblem were the power and cure of God—that instant he ceased to die. So the brazen serpent became the centre of smitten Israel; eager eyes were raised to it from every quarter; clasped hands were stretched towards it; the dying dragged themselves nearer that they might but catch the faintest glimpse; and the wave and light of restored life passed throughout the camp. The dead who had died in their agony were indeed lying there ghastly on the sands; but it was a mighty deliverance, in that the accursed serpent-plague was gone.

The one thing that marks to all time this marvel in the camp of Israel was, the utter simplicity of that act and way in which not only God on His side pledged a cure, but on the people's side the cure was seized.

The sufferer had but to *look* on the uplifted sign and he straight was healed. It was an action simple as the famished man opening his mouth for bread—the man consumed of thirst lapping at the stream of water—the man sinking in some malady holding out his hands to the physician. Would not all of these act in such wise from simple instinct ; would one of them shrink one moment from the thing his soul panted for ; would there be hesitancy or mistrust ; would there not rather be an intense leaping forward towards the one help that stood between him and death ? Even so with the Israelites struck by the fiery serpents ; the remedy of God was raised before them, blazoned with its high meaning, lustrous as the sun that shone upon it, and, as one thrill through the dying throng, every eye sent forth its gaze ; none would have ventured, save through the strangest madness, one instant's pause in that dread question ; and so, through the simple deed, the dropping victims no more died but lived.

Have we not like simplicity in God's great remedy with us ? “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,” said Christ Himself, “even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” It is true, we first ask how any likeness can be found between the spotless and the loving Christ, and the loathsome deadly serpent ? Is the figure not the very

contrary to all we associate with the blessed Lamb of God? But it is explained when we remember that we, in the first place, are in like case with the smitten Israelites; we are plague-struck and destroyed of sin; *it* is the serpent-poison and the serpent-fang creeping in our path, and wounding our whole soul to death. As then, in the emblem of the brazen serpent on its pole, the Israelites beheld that very thing that had been their curse transfixed and slain, and as in their look thither they believed that God had so done, and that the death was taken off them and destroyed there for ever; so, in Christ lifted up and slain upon the tree, *we* see the deadly thing that has tormented us transfixed and crucified; there is no shadow or mere figure in the matter; it is the literal word of Scripture: "He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities;" and again, "Who Himself bare our sins in His own body on the tree;" and again, "For He hath made Him to be sin for us Who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him;"—I say it is so literally stated, this great truth on which our atonement and salvation hang, that while we do not dream of so much as one shade of the poison of sin darkening by its lodgement the pure soul of Christ, yet unquestionably, into His body, on His very heart, sin was taken in its weight and curse and death; so that in His nailing to the cross *it* was crucified, in His pouring out His soul unto death *it* was

destroyed ; and we now looking thither and beholding Him, and believing that our worst enemy, even sin, so has perished—we die no more, but live with an eternal life ! Such is how the blessed Christ compares Himself lifted up on the tree of Calvary to the brazen serpent lifted up by Moses on its desert staff.

And has it not so become a thing of intensest simplicity that, for our peace, we gaze on the crucified Christ ? What can be simpler than that we make the eye an avenue, so to call it, through which the whole soul may go out in steady fixedness, and see all in Him—sin and death abolished—life, as the very power of God, given ? Who yet, in awakened conscience and broken spirit, has so fastened all hope and faith on the uplifted Christ but has felt the shadow fly from off the face, the malady from off the heart ? For when I look, it is *my* sin in all its length and breadth I see pierced in His woundings,—it is *my* lot, in all its cruel sufferings and pains, I see winnowed of its bitterness in His passion,—it is *my* death I see annihilated for evermore in His ! But, alas, it is in the very simplicity of this great ordinance of God that we are often lost. Acute speculation will not have it ; the ingenious fears of all sorts we conjure up in our self-torture hang back from it ; all our preconceptions of the heights that must be levelled and the depths that must be filled up ere we can find our way back to God forbid it ; in a thousand ways the pathway of the Cross becomes foolishness in the world.

And men are roaming in their search in all the mines of human knowledge and human wisdom throughout the earth, while the one pearl of great price lies here at home at their very feet. They are abroad in every kind of quest, while here at home the Lord Jesus, "His head filled with dew, His locks with the drops of the night," is knocking at the door of their hearts. They are flying off at every diverse way leading them on this hand and that, till they go stumbling on the dark mountains, many of them, alas, falling to rise no more, while here at home is the way of God straight by the Cross as an arrow-flight to heaven, and so plain as that the way-faring man, though a fool, need not err therein. We fear, in many instances at least, the secret is that the serpent-plague of sin is not felt with its fiery restlessness in the heart. Ah, once let that awake, and a thousand phantoms of the life, the reasoning, the mechanical beliefs or no beliefs of former days, are instantly put to flight. We *cannot* play with theories when we have before us then the naked choice of life or death. We then dispel the tempter; we then have no hope in all the waste of human substitutes on earth; we turn, as the poorest pilgrim of Israel may have turned his languid head upon the sands, and we set our all, like him, in one gaze upon the mighty power of God—

"Nothing in our hands we bring,  
Simply to the Cross we cling."

And the look once set there, it is there we find our

pole-star ever after. Each day, in its new griefs, its new apprehensions, its new infirmities, and, alas ! its new sins, we still turn ourselves, that all may go forth and be cast on Christ slain for us—we fasten our dependence to its utmost shade upon Him, and we learn with a still increasing meaning to reiterate the daily descant as we go—

“ Nothing in our hands we bring,  
Simply to the Cross we cling ! ”

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

*Israel's Keeper.*





By a pass opening through the Edomite hills to the north-east of the sea of Akaba, the Israelites gradually worked their way round the borders of Edom, and so out into the broad rolling downs of Seir. Thence, after a march of stormy conflict and bloodshed, in the course of which they swept away the Amorites, they came, at last, locust-like, or, as they were described by the alarmed Balak, licking up all round about them, "as the ox licketh up the grass of the field," and, in such array, pitched among the hills, whose crests overlooked the Jordan and the fields of Canaan beyond.

A wide-spread terror ran as their herald in front, and hovered in their track behind ; and none did this terror seize more profoundly than Balak, one of the Moabite kings, past whose territory the dark invasion was now wending its way. He feared to try with the invaders the issue of battle ; for in that trial the Amorites had already fallen. But he fell on the device instead of bringing power not of earth to grapple with these hated trampers on his soil. And so comes in upon the borders of our wilderness story the singular episode of Balaam, son of Peor. He was one of those beyond the

elect circle of God's grace and revelation in the olden time, (such as were Melchisedek and Job and Jethro,) who, in their outside heathen twilight, seem mysteriously to have caught upon them shoots of divine discovery—as tokens at the time that, while God had a chosen people, He had yet not left the whole world besides in utter blackness—and as preludes also that a time should come when the narrow boundary of one selected nation would be broken down, Gentile as well as Jew would share in the covenant of Heaven, and “*all* nations of the earth be blessed.” This Balaam dwelt in an Eastern land, where his fame ran high to excess—in that whomsoever he might bless *he* was blessed, whomsoever he might curse *he* was cursed. Undeniably God's power rested on him ; he was covetous and false at heart, and perished among the enemies of God at last ; but meantime, as a gifted seer, he was visited by illuminations straight from God, and stood so eminent upon the edge of God's kingdom that his whole figure was revealed in light. To him accordingly Balak sent in his distress messengers of high rank—gold and silver lavishly. Would he come under such bribes and inflict a curse on Israel? We need not follow all the steps in the striking yet melancholy story. There was strong possibility at first sight that what Balak wished might be done ; and Israel, all unconscious of these dark machinations moving to and fro around it, might have found its host called on to

fight not any more against enemies of flesh and blood but against impalpable adversaries of curse and blight, that might have made them shrink as in the breath of pestilence. Such was Balaam's power, I say, that it might thus have stolen in upon the camp, and brought the whole desert-pilgrimage to nought.

But the Lord that kept Israel had set too keen a watch round about. He was at the ear of Balaam quick as the tempter with his bribes. He followed silently each word and step. He checked the false heart of Balaam, both at the outset and by the way. Not one loophole of advantage would He, in short, allow that treacherous tamperer with God's honour and his own soul,—not one loophole whereby he might wind through into some compliance with the demands of Balak. So that, when the latter led Balaam first up to the heights of Baal, and there from their seven smoking altars they looked down on the host of Israel darkening the plain like a cloud ; and again when a second trial was made from another view-point, whence but a mere section of the camp was seen ; and yet again when a third time Balak led his guest up to a crowning eminence, and once more bid him curse the multitude below, —on all three occasions Balaam poured out a blessing instead, waxing higher and higher in splendid and emphatic speech. He would have done the opposite, but his tongue was constrained of God,—it was bent to speak *His* will. And so triumphantly did God care for

and save His own, that not only did He stand a shield between the conjuring of Balak and Balaam and His people,—not only was it that He insured they should escape without scath,—but He so compelled the evil that was devised against them into good,—He so seized the stammering tongue and the traitorous heart and the whole dark menace hanging over Israel—that the darkness poured out light, and the mouth of cursing poured out blessing, and the pilgrim-hosts that were to have been destroyed moved forward, scattering their enemies in confusion more than ever! Even so, at the face of Israel's Keeper, Balak shrank dismayed.

It may be said the same far-seeing sleepless guardianship of God is witnessed in His ordinary providence round all. How many destructive forces, for example, sleeping in nature round us, does His hand repress, any one of which, unloosed an hair-breadth, would strike us into nothing! And not only so, but how these relentless forces, by the arrangement and the care of God, are put into our hands in a great measure to be our boon—whereby, through processes of marvellous beauty, (were they not too common now to affect us,) we obtain the air we breathe, and the food we eat, and the raiment we put on. So, by the restraining and compelling hand of God most merciful, that world that might be either our prison cell or our grave is a wide dwelling-place of loveliness and plenty. Also, it is God's watchfulness that surrounds and prepares triumph for all the good causes

of our common humanity—such as the seed of civilisation, the path of commerce, the light of discovery in science, the growth of freedom, the upspringing of any truth or charity or nobler life of which men have need,—from how small beginnings God has led all such causes,—how many barriers of land and sea and the stubborn strength of hell itself has He broken down for them,—and, amidst the fluctuations of their progress, how has He never allowed any cause dear to human well-being really to perish. But yet in sense far higher than all such guardianship has been the watchful tending of our God round His own special cause in the earth. In the Church's story, from the time of the little seed up now to the expanding of the great tree, we have over and over instances, lastingly memorable, of the keepership of God. How the fires of persecution of to-day, for example, have become the zeal and vehemence of friends to-morrow! How the enemy of God, putting the poor martyr to his cruel death, has been breathed on by the parting spirit, and himself has fallen on the knees in prayer! How the cause, supposed to be crushed out at one stake, has dropped its mantle with such power increased that an hundred stakes more must burn, and these only to produce their farther crop of thousands! Know we not how God has thus countlessly made the curse of men His kingdom's blessing—that not only has He saved that kingdom, and put the thick bosses of His buckler round it, but He has bent

the elements of evil that arose against it in such wise that He has yoked them in its chariot shafts,—He has made them serve its better triumph,—He has compelled their speech, like that of Balaam, to speak its praise,—through their designed ill, He has brought out the Church's enhanced prosperity and good !

And what the Mighty One of Israel has been doing in the wide circle of the Church, He has been repeating not less tenderly and powerfully in the little circle of each redeemed soul. Have we even the faintest guess how often, in the pathway of our lives, the enemy has bent the bow and shot the arrow against us, and it has been warded off by the quick hand of our Saviour God? Have we the faintest thought of the abysses we have trembled over, no more conscious than the sleep-walker; the ruin that has gaped to snatch us; the temptations that have breathed past us like a scorching whirlwind, and that have destroyed so many others; and this our God has kept us in the hollow of His hand through them all? Glimpses indeed we *have* had, as in cases in which we have been tossed in the storm of trial, but presently the Lord Jesus, as He did with His disciples, has arisen and rebuked the elements to peace, and it has flashed upon us, "What manner of man is this"—our Keeper and our Lord,—*"that even the wind and the sea obey him!"* And again we catch note of how He makes the vastness and the strength of all things bow to bless His people;

these very things that would have frowned upon them and destroyed them else,—when, looking back over a stretch of life, we see how the crooked places have been made straight for us, and the rough places plain—the wilderness pools of water, and the dry land springs of water. Who has not passages along his way like this to acknowledge—the evil changed into the good, the cursing compelled, like Balaam's tongue, to yield the blessing? And who, then, cannot rise to the inference somewhat, that, if need be, our Saviour-God will make the strong universe and all its laws, and all its stupendous movement stoop around us, even us in our littleness and weakness; for He Who holds us sleeplessly in the hollow of His hand is the same God Who weighs the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance; Who holds also the depths of the sea in the hollow of His hand, and taketh up the isles as a very little thing! I say, any one who looks back thoughtfully over any back page of his life may gain hints of these things. But oh! never, never can he know in full extent what the guardianship of the blessed God round him has implied first and last; how wondrously He has taken the mouth of hate and evil and put into it, for our sake, the silver tongue of blessing; how He has extracted that thing that has been best and happiest for us from what we have most feared; how our feeble prayers have been wafted up, and have not only fallen on the ear but moved into strength and triumph

the arm of His omnipotence ; how the spot where we have dwelt on earth has been the spot of His delight—the axis of the whole world of His love and care—about which they have revolved and shed themselves, and made the darkness light around us, and infirmity in Christ a glory, and suffering a benediction, and the ills we bear a prophecy of coming victory, and death itself the vestibule to life ! We never can know these things in full, till, with the purged sight of another state, we see back the whole pathway we have come. And yet surely there are intimations enough now to enlarge our hearts and make our steps buoyant. We are travelling forward overflung by the network of the guardianship of our God. Who can hurt us or destroy us ? What can flesh do unto us ? Nay, do we not rise a note higher, and claim the whole universe of God as tributary to us—everything made to run into the current of our blessing, and to be a portion of our spiritual greatness before God—for, as the poorest lips that call on the name of Christ can say, “ All things are ours, whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come—all are ours ; and we are Christ’s ; and Christ is God’s ! ”



CHAPTER XXIX.

Death at the Threshold.



ALONG the plains of Moab, a green and shady belt lying on the eastern bank of the Jordan, between the table-lands of Abarim and the river, the tribes of Israel were now encamped. This was their last stage; the desert pilgrimage was at its close; and as they were sheltered for the time under the acacia-groves that grew thick over the Moabite valley, the Promised Land lay there, across the deep cleft of waters, full in view. It was here,—at the threshold of their great triumph—their forty years' prize so long and wearily travailed for, about to be won at last,—it was here Moses, under God their leader and lawgiver, was summoned to die.

Every precaution had been taken by him, as he knew the inevitable hour drew on. A portion of the tribes had been settled in the rich lands conquered to the eastward of the Jordan—the Moabites and others had been scattered to make unimpeded room for the final march beyond the river—Joshua had had solemnly transferred to him the leadership of Israel—in a long and affecting address, Moses had reviewed the whole history of the people's wanderings, reiterated to them the commandments of their covenant God, chanted

with them another song such as their fathers had sung in full melody by the waters of the Red Sea, and finally pronounced on each tribe his dying benediction. All was done,—the mournful farewell was said ; the faults and follies, and harassings of the past—the venerable man of God forgot them all now, as, going on through the tented lines and under the thorny clumps, he must have been followed by weeping hundreds ; and again he must have stopped to say some soothing word ; and again he must have pushed on with a steadfast, though breaking heart. Now he addresses himself to the mountain steep ; there is a line where the last Israelite must pause ; and the hand of Moses waves its parting to the camp ; and his form, visible for a minute as it turns to face the hill, plunges into the hill-side thickets, and thence forward to the Pisgah summit his pathway is alone.

Silence lay along that lonely way—silence was in the deep blue air—silence on the prophet's lips, and in his heart. His great office had been laid down—the burden of the whole people was off his heart ; and it now remained for him only to see the land he was not to tread ; and then, so strangely lightened, and alone, and in the deep mountain silence, to die. Presently therefore he reached the Nebo edge. We know not if the encampment he had left was underneath his eye ; rather would we think of it as hidden by some sweeping of the hill, and that, nothing living near him save

the shadow of God, Moses stood in his death-hour looking down on the wide world literally alone. No doubt, the past way of the wilderness and the flood was wonderingly run over, and every stage, like a compressed, yet intensely vivified chapter of God's mercy and truth, seen to start out with light. So in dreams; so in dying moments—when the brain is singularly lit, the entire life is said to come back, flashing itself and all its meaning into the lapse of a minute; so before the eyes of Moses on his Pisgah rock may have gleamed the desert pathway of forty years. But the view lay mainly forward. To the north, the good land stretched before his eager gaze in its fields and slopes till it melted in the dim slopes of utmost Lebanon—across, right before him, rolled the green undulations of Judah, till, afar off, they, too, dropped into the haze that marked the line of the great sea—and southward, spread the same rich swell, meeting, as its boundary in that direction, the yellow cloud-border of the outer wilderness. Immediately over against him, crowning its palm-tree summit, were the towers of Jericho; while the eye, pursuing the deep valley of the Jordan, lost itself in the sicklied mists hanging over the accursed basin of the Dead Sea. Such was the fair-framed picture set by God himself under the vision of Moses. Did it awaken any pang of sorrow that his feet might not touch the holy soil—that, after all that had come and gone in the deliverance of Israel, his hand might

not guide this last and greatest conquest? Did the still strong frame of the aged man bow itself upon the rock, and the clear eyes suffuse with tears, as he felt it a bitter thing thus to die at the threshold? There was no hint of any such emotion; if any such crossed him for a moment, it passed from that noble brow as the fleck of shadow in the broad sunshine. And, as we judge, even while he looked, the earthly faded—the mystery of the heavenly was near—the silver-white head leaned on the rock in a sudden sigh—and the next moment the spot where he stood was vacant—only his footprint on the grass remained—the great servant of the Lord was not, for the Lord took him! There was a passing clash of armour in the air, for the devil disputed with Michael the archangel for the dead body's spoil; but the Lord Himself bore the sacred burden into the solitudes of Beth-peor, and buried it there where no man knew!

There is something confessedly most pathetic in this death at the threshold. We *would*, somehow, that Moses had lived to see his life-work done, and the success for which he pioneered the way so gloriously and painfully, not only within his grasp, but actually grasped. Does it not seem a most hapless fate that, at that last crowning step, he should have fallen—in the very doorway of the long-dreamt-of Canaan, he should have died? And we carry the same sort of feeling *into* our thought of deaths and losses in the kingdom

of God now. How many who have led the battle bravely through the heat and burden of the day, and have been struck down just in the hour of victory! How many have toiled, utterly negligent of self, for years and years in some great project, and when all the storms are over and the haven just in sight, they have fallen, worn out, at their posts! How many in their first manhood have had years opening before them flushed with promise, and ere they have well stepped into the field and cropped the first harvest, they have been struck down—literally, they have died on the threshold! We might quote a hundred such baffled, broken lives besides. Nothing the world mourns over more—nothing, when the blow falls, seems to us more irreparable. Are they really baffled and broken lives? Are they really, what we at first thought count them, sad and mysterious failures—creations bright and noble in their beginning, disappointments, darkneses, miseries in the end?

If we look for a moment thoughtfully at the matter, my reader, we cannot at all think so, but the reverse. For God would teach us, that there is no work or cause in the world for good to be considered as the peculiar possession of any man—that the whole work and the whole cause are His own—that, therefore, no one, not even the rarest of His saints, is indispensable to Him. He sends him into the world but as an instrument to do an appointed part—a link in the chain—a torch in

the line of light. So, while we look at the sphere some one life is fitted, as we think, splendidly to fill up, God looks beyond that small and arbitrary circle at the vast sweep of His advancing kingdom—and, according to the exigences and the calls of that, He puts down one man and raises up another—He leads a Peter to an early crucifixion in the footsteps of his Lord—He protracts the ministry of a John till, through the feebleness of utmost age, he drops into his grave—He will let one labour, and also enter into the fruit of his labour—He will let another labour, but just as he is entering in, bid him, as He bade Moses, die. Wherefore, looking at our human lives in the light of that high sovereignty of God, even that which seems to us on this earthly side most baffled and fragmentary we dare not for a moment call incomplete. At whatever point it has been arrested, if it has performed the part God assigned it in the vastness of His scheme, it is a life rounded and done.

Moreover, when it pleases God to cut short a gifted human life, smiting it with death at the threshold, it may in this mystery of His dealing be better so; and, therefore, the existence attain a completeness higher and of more glorious kind than if, in its earthly framework, it had gone on to live. For it receives tenfold power in its death; it awakens men's sorrow; it calls their deepest thought into play; it realises to them as it passes away all its nobleness and influence,



and the grandeur of the cause in which it fell ; if there is no *one* man to snatch at the whole legacy it leaves, there are a hundred stirred up to snatch at least each his part ; and so, just as the clustering ear of corn when cut down shakes its seeds abroad, and these spring up, in some thirty, in some sixty, in some an hundred fold, a rich life, cut down and shaken by the hand of God, strews a power behind it, for which even what we call its premature death is not too great a price to pay. Such was the completeness of Moses's life at the very moment, in his death on the Canaan border, all men would have thought otherwise. He died that the heart of Israel might be moved to thoughts his death alone could strike ; that, as he let the staff of God fall, hundreds might arise to catch it up ; that, instead of their entering Canaan mechanically dependent, as heretofore, on his high guidance and his sure prevalency with God, the vanishing away of his figure from the host—the startling blank left—and yet the path of conquest there before them, where he had pointed with his dying finger—by these they might be appealed to resistlessly ; they might feel his spirit pass into them ; they might rise into new and heroic being ; they might move forward as one man to crown his work in such triumphant sort as even he, if left alive, could not have done. Life dying at the threshold, therefore, changes thus, and on that very account, into life the most gloriously fulfilled.

Let us, then, my reader, humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God. From our human side let us strive to realise His broad divine view of what our lot is on the earth. Let us count no work or sphere ours, in that sense that we shall ever dream it must depend on the strength of our arm or the sustaining of our life and heart. Thankfully indeed do we gather up the tokens that our labour in the good cause of our God is not in vain in the Lord,—that the seed we sow is springing to the harvest,—that the enterprise we have engaged in and yielded all our heart to is developing through all trials and battles into high success. And thankful and blessed also should we deem ourselves if, in God's good will, we should be allowed to finish here on earth what we have begun—to bring home the sheaves rejoicing, whose seed we went forth to sow with tears. A cruel stroke should we feel it if, at the threshold of such fruits, death should cut us down. Yet never let us fail to reiterate to ourselves, that what we do in God's cause on earth is *His* privilege granted us, and that alone; that our portion of His cause assigned us is not ours, but His; that whether we shall do it but for one hour and then have our strength broken, or do it fifty years, either time is our complete measure, and God then but resumes His own. We shall thus learn to lean, in life—even when it has been an arduous and well-fought course—very sparingly upon

ourselves, and to lean with great confidence on God. We shall feel that, though we or any man die, God's work in His own hand will perish never. And as to the sharp trial to the natural feeling death in the midway of our work—death in sight of that work's last conquest is—we shall take home that, if our life has been humble, true, single, worthy in God, even while it dies it will an hundred times over bless—it will leave seeds in other hearts, out of which our work shall be finished with a double victory. And as for us, caught away, like Moses, in the sight of our earthly reward—the good land before us, but our feet never to be on its soil—it will only be, like Moses also, to find our reward full in heaven. There the shaft, looking on the earth broke across, is built up a noble pillar in the temple of our God. There the hand, that all but closed upon its prize on earth yet just fell short, puts on the golden crown and holds the palm of victory. There the ardent spirit, fainting and dying at the threshold on earth, is seated on the throne of him that has overcome, and has right to the tree of life. All the brokenness and incompleteness here is amended into everlasting fulness there. Each fragment life we mourned over here is “orbed into its perfect star” there. And as we look up thither, with such certainties as these, oh surely we shall never falter in our pilgrim way,—we shall not fear, even with the whole fruit of our doings ungathered,

any moment God may please, to die—we shall rather all the more earnestly while we live press on in the current of God's kingdom, with the fervent mind of Jesus saying, "I must work the works of Him that sent me while it is day ; for the night cometh when no man can work !"

CHAPTER XXX.

*Fording the Dark Waters.*



IN the pleasant plain by the edge of the Jordan, the pilgrims were encamped, now at their journey's end, as on ground we might call their Beulah. It was not only that it was a space lovely in itself, but it caught all the light of hope and promise from the near land of their rest little more than a step across. Only the flooded bed of the river rolled its brown waters deep and turbulent between ; but as the long company of the Israelites watched from their tent-doors, or went up and down by the sedgy banks, looking at the harvest-flood in its fury, or their eyes travelling up the opposite steep to the battlements of Jericho half hid among the palm-trees, not one but must have felt assured that this last span of difficulty also God would in some way bridge across. Had the Red Sea at the outset of the great pilgrimage not parted for their fathers, and would this chasm of the Jordan at the great pilgrimage's close not make a passage-way for them ? Yet, while from their Beulah spot there was so much in the immediate prospect to fling over them the flush of exultation, there was a great deal, too, might have crossed them (and in the more reflective hearts I have no doubt did cross them) from the thought of the past, to sober them and sadden them down. What a memorable pathway was theirs, now of forty years, through the wilderness !

What an utter blank all the region had been before,—how thick now with the monuments of their wanderings, follies, infirmities, sins, and shame, and of God's patience, love, miracles, revelations, mercy! What hallowed ground, as the eye ran back and lighted on the long chain of heavenly footprints indelible among the rocks and sand for ever! With all their weariness and perverseness by the way,—their cry one day to flee back to Egypt,—their cry next to press on and be at their journey's close,—was there not now a strange lingering about the heart as though they would fain almost retrace these desert scenes? With all its chequering of light and gloom, peril and deliverance, life and death, was there not a deep sorrow now in feeling that this great page in their history was done, and the leaf about to be turned for ever? I believe some, at least, of the Israelites must have meditated thus on the past,—must have realised to themselves what the Desert Pathway had made them and theirs,—not only what an impress it would leave on Israelite life and history to all time, but what a stamp of heaven it had left on them, the actual pilgrims. Where else would they have acquired that moulding, that light, that regenerated being, which, in measure more or less, was theirs—sealed on them by the hand of God? Would they have ever caught it in the dark slavery of Goshen? Would they have taken it on, though they had been princes and not slaves, in the luxurious valley of the Nile? Was it not alone through the far-shrouded avenue of the desert-way



Israelite life could have had the birth that had passed upon it into the likeness and the will of God ?

So that with all the solemn shadows memory summoned up there by the waters of the Jordan, they became, after all, in the penitent and pious heart, but a tempering of the now glorious Beulah light,—but a making more mellow this quiet and beauteous evening that closed in the fitful and stormy pilgrimage-day. And as it had been anticipated, so God was with His people to the last. Jericho had been spied out, and it was discovered how the heart of the Canaanites had melted in them through fear ; the last wonder of the arm of God therefore struck that terror home. He bade Joshua marshal the tribes upon the river bank ; He directed how the priests, bearing the holy ark, were to go several paces in advance ; and, soon as the serried march began—the Israelite eyes intent from this side, the heathen eyes intent and cowering from the other side—there was the hush of God's own leading felt. Down to the dark and rushing ford He brought His priestly band straight ; and the instant their gleaming feet touched the wave, it was cleft across from bank to bank. On the right, the roaring flood gathered back upon itself, pent up as if an iron breast-work held it in its wild wrath helpless ; on the left, the current failed away, the channelled bed lay bare, and the priests planting themselves the while with their sacred burden in mid-stream, the deep masses of the Israelites passed *across steady as on dry land*. They climbed the other

bank, file by file, thousand by thousand. They were on the soil of God's promise at last. They were in their Canaan home, making black its threshold with their numbers. And as the last man was helped up the edge, and the priests then raised the ark, and in slow and measured step emerged also from the river's depth, it was surely startling to the heart of Israel to see the champing flood burst its barrier—to watch it sweeping all its banks to the very brim again—and to reflect that, by the line now of these loosened waters, they, on the spot where their feet were set, were cut off from the desert and its pilgrimage for ever!

To the pilgrim still, as he hastens through his last stage home, it is a marvellous hour that Beulah hour, just ere the sweep of death is crossed. With some there has been a light from the near land so bright, that it has made the deathbed all aglow with heaven; streams of rapturous gladness have broken from the lips; sentences of chastened yet burning anticipation have flowed from the pen. Yea, to that extent has such experience gone, that it has been related of one, dying under the kindled glories he beheld rising on him beyond death, that his ecstasy mounted to such a pitch his attendants had to beseech him to be hushed, otherwise he should not have power to die! But for the most part, with those especially who have come out of the sorrows and the blessings of the Desert Pathway, it is a tempered though beauteous light, a quiet sunset calm. In that solemn hour, if God pre-

serves to us our faculties, and we are not stretched on the rack of pain, what a halo of mingled memory the one way and hope and looking forward the other gathers round us ! We look back on the earthly way about to close. We thank God now for all its hardships and distresses, as we counted them at the time ! We rejoice our way was not in the stages of plenty, and of great temporal ease, and success, and, as the world reckons it, happiness. We see how these would have relaxed most dangerously the up-springing of our soul to God ; and how, in the last hour, such fetters would they have cast around us, that it would have been a hard and a fearful thing to die. In our spiritual feebleness, we should then have been in the case of those whom the prophet addresses when he so startlingly asks them,—“ If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses ? And if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan ? ” Yes, verily, with the spiritual nature that through the unnerving of earthly prosperity could so ill bear a strain in life, how could we have borne to face the fording of the dark waters in death ? But in that soft twilight hour I have called our Beulah, just on the hither side Jordan ere we die, we bless God that it has been the contrary case with us ; that although we rebelled, and repined, and often made our hearts hard under it, He yet *led us persistently* in “ the right way ; ” that He gave us

the cross of feeble health to bear; that He scattered our fair hopes at a breath; that He wounded us to the quick with anxiety, with bereavement, with sorrow; that He made us often and again ask the question, "Wherefore dost Thou afflict me thus?" We bless His name, that all the while He was weaning us in heart and soul to Himself; that He was raising us and constraining us on to the level of His blessed world above; that He was giving token on token of our being the chosen people of His love—according to that wondrous yet most holy principle, "Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth;" and that by that vicissitude and sharpness and wandering to and fro in the desert path all these years,—now in a break of sunshine, now in the folds of gloom, now under quiet shade and rest, now in the brunt of heat and storm—He was preparing us for this unutterable sweetness at the close, this Beulah eventide, and yonder, just across the fords of death, the good land and the glorious day. In such retrospect, my reader, what life, the barrenest wilderness as it may have seemed in passing through, but becomes strewn with the selected goings to and fro of the blessed God! We read of the poor prisoner who inherited a solitary cell for long years; in that time he had watched a little creeper plant growing with its soft tendrils in one of the crevices of the bleak stone walls outside his window; he had watched it till he knew every fringe and fibre, and the sweet growth he

would have crushed in a common path outside, in this desert corner grew literally into his heart ; so that when at last he was released, he found there was a pathos about the bare cell and the mute climbing-plant that had consecrated many hours, and that, even with freedom and his home in view, made it hard for him to tear himself away. So in the desert way we have come ; so illuminated does it shew at the hour of parting, all its nooks and spots and windings revealing some tie of tenderness and blessing such as in no other path but in the grief and loneliness and barrenness of this could have wound themselves about us, that, even with heaven and all its rest in view, we cannot quite break away from it. We feel as if we should like to traverse it again. We bless God He led us as He did. We behold it *all* a path of blessing. We find what at the end it has made us ; that if we have "come out of great tribulation," we have also "washed our robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb !"

Then, turning round on such a death-pillow, what to us is death ? It is a dark and cold river indeed, across the rushing straits of which we could never of ourselves hold our way ; but the covenant God, Who has led us in the way we knew not already, will be with us still. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil ; for Thou art with me : Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me." As we edge on to the death-flow—slacken all earthly *holds—feel the light and the love of earth fade—we*

see—we *must* see—with the opened inward eye, One Who is our great High Priest from heaven—on the dark background His figure white as light—making the heart of all our enemies melt around us and before us for fear—scattering our sins in their multitude for ever—scattering the tempter and his myriads that hang gnashingly around us—and our last enemy, even death, utterly destroying that ; for as His pierced feet touch the waters, they are rent in twain—as He stands, the ark of His own Cross planted in the deep middle ford, they roar in the restraint overhead, but they cannot oversweep us ; we pass dryshod where we had thought there was the fearfulest of all depths ; we climb on the other shore into the ten thousand arms of love waiting us. And as the blessed Lord himself then releases death in its foam and surge behind us, we are struck—oh, so unutterably !—with the everlasting change ; the light affliction there behind us, the exceeding glory here ; the Desert Pathway cut off there, the hills and vales of Canaan here ; the pillow of pain and of helplessness we died on there, the embrace of our God and Saviour we are clasped in here ! What is death, if through death we make such a change as that—if, after fording the dark waters, we are home with God, and, looking up to Him, can say :—

“ For ever on the Incarnate breast,  
That fount of sweetness, let me rest !  
My spirit every hour imbued  
More deeply with His precious blood ! ”

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